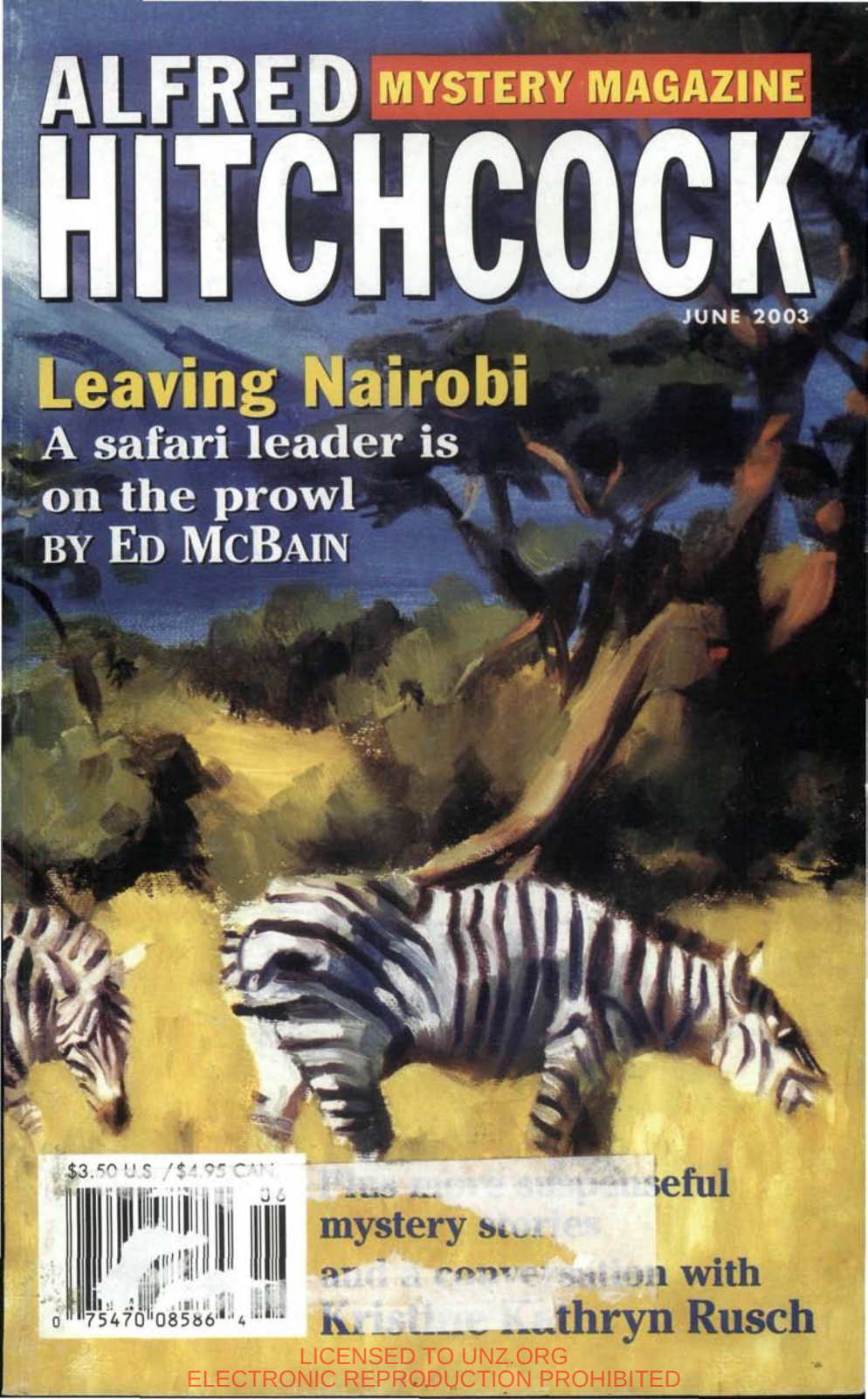
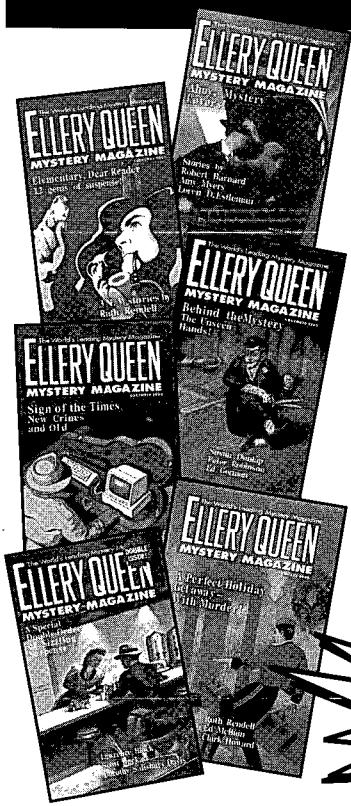


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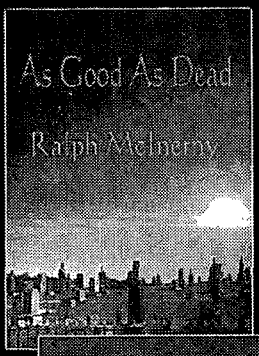
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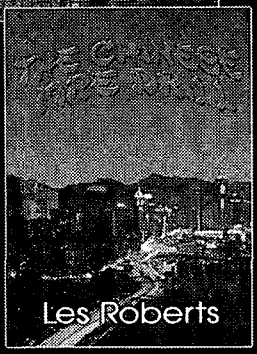
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CONTENTS

June 2003

Cover by Sandra Templeton

FICTION

6 LEAVING NAIROBI by Ed McBain

24 THE DESTRUCTION OF A GODDESS by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

48 LADY APPLETON AND THE CRIPPLEGATE CHRISOMS by Kathy Lynn Emerson

68 THE ROCK IN THE ORANGE GROVE by Mitch Alderman

86 REMEMBER JACK by Geoffrey Hitchcock

94 UNDER THE WHIP by John F. Dobbyn

114 DEATH BY DONUTS by Elaine Stirling

MYSTERY CLASSIC

124 ALL THE BIRDS OF THE AIR by Charles B. Child

DEPARTMENTS

4 EDITOR'S NOTES

44 CONVERSATION with Kristine Kathryn Rusch

46 BOOKED & PRINTED

67 BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY Kate's Mystery Books

93 SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED"

112 DYING WORDS Acrostic Puzzle by Arlene Fisher

139 THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

140 THE STORY THAT WON

Indicia on page 143

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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

WELCOME TO A NEW LOOK FOR Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.

With this issue, we are introducing some obvious and not-so-obvious changes. Most noticeably, the magazine now sports a clean, contemporary new design that we think is airy and easy on the eyes. In terms of content, our primary mission continues to be the publication of the finest mystery and suspense short stories. But we also aspire to be a source of interesting and timely information for mystery readers, and we have slightly adjusted our editorial mix to better meet that goal. Especially, we are introducing two new features: Busman's Holiday and conversations with authors.

If you're like me, one of the joys of travel is the opportunity to visit mystery bookstores in cities across the country, learning about local authors and regional tastes. The first stop for our Busman's Holiday column is Kate's Mystery Books in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Watch for other profiles of independent mystery bookstores, some of which you may encounter on your travels, others you may want to go out of your way to visit.

Readers have written us over the years wanting to know more about their favorite authors. Our new Conversation feature presents the authors in their own words, talking about their lives and work. This month Kristine Kathryn Rusch discusses the origins of her Smokey Dalton series.

We've also tweaked two familiar departments. Since January we have organized our reviews in the Booked & Printed column to group books that are related, whether by theme or setting, and we are also striving to bring more small and independent press books to your attention. Also, we are adding a little variety to the monthly puzzle. In addition to Robert Kesling's wonderful—and challenging—logic puzzles, our mix now includes some acrostics, a feature we call Dying Words, which we hope you'll find equally engaging.

All this is inaugurated with a particularly strong selection of stories, including the return of Ed McBain to our pages and introducing first-time author Mitch Alderman.

Our new look is the result of a team effort. Special thanks are due to our smart, hard-working art department, and to all of our colleagues at Dell Magazines who contributed to the effort.

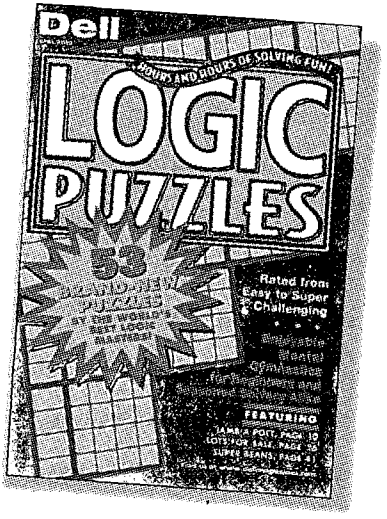
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LEAVING NAIROBI

ED MCBAIN

On the jumbo jet from Nairobi to New York, Jeremy is trying to explain to his wife why he feels . . . well . . . somewhat guilty about Davey Ladd's suicide.

Everywhere around them, passengers are wearing earphones and watching the movie.

Jeremy is whispering all this.

"But why should you feel guilty at *all?*" Therese asks.

She is whispering, too. They have spent the last two days in a courtroom on Taifa Road, where a panel of magistrates ruled that David Lawrence Ladd had taken his own life. It rained during the entire inquest. It was still raining when the plane took off from Jomo Kenyatta International this morning.

"Well, you know," Jeremy says. "Because of the problem we had with him."

"The problem was of his own making," Therese says.

"Even so."

"He was a very troubled individual," she says.

Therese is thirty-two years old, lean and supple, and almost as tall as Jeremy; a startlingly beautiful brunette with large brown eyes and long black hair. On safari, she wore her hair coiled into a bun at the back of her neck. She wore khaki shorts she bought at the Gap and a khaki jacket with huge flap pockets. For the long plane ride home, she is wearing jeans and a baggy white cotton sweater.

Therese is twenty years younger than Jeremy.

He never expected the difference in their ages would become a problem, especially not so soon after their marriage. He knows he is not a spectacularly handsome man, but he considers himself reasonably good-looking in a somewhat distinguished way, with graying sideburns and a tall . . . well, almost stately . . . bearing. He considers himself a modest man, and he's not at all sure he agrees with *New York Magazine's* evaluation of him as one of the best internists in the city. He recognizes that he is a very good doctor

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Meredith Lightbown

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. . . but one of the best? All he knows for certain is that he has tried to live both his personal and professional lives by the credo "Do no harm."

But now Davey Ladd is dead, isn't he?

"By his own hand," Therese reminds him.

"Yes."

"So why should you be feeling guilty?"

"You should have seen him."

"You see dead people all the time."

"Not that many."

"Enough. You're in the hospital every day . . ."

"Yes, but . . ."

"There are dead people in the hospital."

"They don't look the way he did."

Davey Ladd lying naked on his back with his own 9-millimeter pistol in his mouth, blood all over the pillow and the bed . . .

"This was uncontrolled bleeding, Therese. This was . . . wanton. The back of his skull was gone, the force of the explosion burst his eyeballs. It was gruesome."

"I can imagine."

They are silent for several moments. The man sitting on Jeremy's left, on the aisle, has fallen asleep with his earphones half on, half off. He is snoring loudly, and the muted sound of actors shouting at each other comes from the one earphone hanging loose on his cheek.

"I just hope it wasn't anything . . ."

"It wasn't," Therese says.

". . . I said or did."

"How could it have been?"

"I don't know."

"It was getting out of hand, Jere."

"I know."

"He was a very troubled person."

"I know."

"From the very start," Therese says.

"Well, well, well," Davey says. "What have we here!"

These are his very first words to them.

They are standing with Frank Dobbs just outside the tent that will be theirs for the next eight days. It was Frank who appeared like a savior out of the maelstrom of baggage and travelers at the Nairobi airport the night before. It was Frank who drove them to their overnight lodgings in Nairobi, Frank who picked them up

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again early this morning for their charter flight to the Masai Mara. Frank Dobbs, in his early forties, Jeremy guesses, looking ruddy and robust and sporting a handlebar mustache that gives him the appearance of a London pub keeper.

Their campsite is on the banks of the Mara River, which bisects the huge game preserve. Bordered by a patchy forest on one side, the muddy river meanders through the vast plain, hippos lazing in its waters, crocodiles sunbathing on its scrubby banks. The proximity of the crocs is not reassuring to Jeremy; the camp cannot be more than fifty yards from where they tilt their gaping jaws to the sun.

"This will be home till the twentieth," Frank says.

He is showing them a thirty-foot-long sleeping tent with twin cots, a wardrobe, two folding camp chairs, and a low round table. There is a separate toilet enclosure some five feet behind the tent. There is a small shower stall to the left of that. Everything under canvas. This is not the royal palace. Nor does it even seem like the "luxurious accommodations" promised in the Dobbs–Ladd Safaris brochure.

Davey Ladd lying naked on his back with his own 9-millimeter pistol in his mouth.

"Well, well, well. What have we here!"

They all turn when they hear the voice.

Davey Ladd is wearing very short, tight khaki shorts that bulge with his masculinity. He is wearing as well high-topped shoes and moss-colored socks, a short-sleeved khaki shirt that exposes muscular arms. A shooting vest over that, with loops for shotgun cartridges. He is perhaps a shade under six feet tall, bronzed from constant exposure to the sun. He is hatless, his hair blond, his eyes a greenish-gray. A 9-millimeter pistol is holstered on his right hip.

"Well, well, well. What have we here!"

Jeremy might accept these welcoming words as boyish enthusiasm—Davey is perhaps twenty-seven years old—were they not so blatantly directed to Therese.

"Davey," Frank says, "please meet Dr. and Mrs. Palmer. My partner, Davey Ladd."

"How do you do?" Jeremy says, and extends his hand.

Davey takes Therese's hand instead. Looking into her eyes, holding her hand, he says, "My pleasure, Mrs. Palmer."

And holds her hand a fraction of an instant too long.

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Flustered, Therese withdraws it.

The other couple on the safari is from Minnesota.

They introduce themselves at dinner that night as Lou and Helen Cantori. Lou is a building contractor. Helen works at the public library in Minneapolis. They are both in their mid-forties, Jeremy guesses, both a trifle overweight. Helen is eager to take notes and photographs she can use for a talk at the library when she gets home. Lou tells them he would have preferred going to Vegas but he always goes instead to all these exotic places Helen keeps pulling out of a hat. Last year they went to Papua New Guinea. God knows where they'll end up next year.

They sit around a huge campfire after dinner, looking out over the boundless plain, sparks flying into the darkness beyond. A huge star-filled sky spreads endlessly above them. On the perimeter of the camp they can see the Masai guards patrolling, their spears at the ready.

"Where do all the animals go at night?" Helen wonders out loud.

Davey takes a huge torchlight from where it is resting beside his camp chair. Rising languidly, he snaps on the torch and begins moving its beam in a slow semicircle along the outer reaches of the compound.

Eyes.

There are eyes out there.

Pairs of eyes gleaming in the darkness.

Watching the fire.

Watching the camp.

"Oh my God!" Therese says.

It suddenly occurs to Jeremy that their safety and their well-being—indeed their very lives—are entirely dependent on two strangers their travel agent recommended.

Grinning, Davey snaps out the torch.

"Don't worry, Terry," he says. "I'm here to take care of you."

"Jeremy?" she whispers.

"Yes?"

"Are you awake?"

"Yes, darling."

Beyond the canvas walls of their sleeping tent, Jeremy can hear the cries and calls and rumbles of the night, some very distant, some sounding too terribly close.

"What's wrong with him?" she whispers.

"Who, darling?"

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"The Great White Hunter."

"He's just trying to be friendly."

"I don't need a friend," she says. "What does he mean he'll take *care* of me? Let him take care of Helen Cantori, if he wants to take care of someone."

Something makes a low rumbling sound just outside the tent.

"Did you hear that?" she asks.

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Maybe the Masai guard."

They lie still on their separate cots, listening.

"I feel very exposed," Therese says.

"Yes."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Frightened. I feel frightened."

"Yes, I do too."

They have been married for only three months now. When Alicia died, Jeremy thought he could never be close to another woman again. But then, two years ago, he met Therese at a medical convention in the Caribbean, staying alone at the same hotel where the assembled internists held their daily meetings under umbrellas on the beach.

"Shall I come to your bed?" she asks.

"Please."

He hears her rustling in the dark. Hears her footfalls on the groundsheet. He throws back the light blanket for her, and she crawls into the narrow cot beside him. She huddles close in his arms. He can hear her gentle breathing beside him. And then the low rumbling just outside again.

"There it is again," she whispers.

They listen.

In the dark, every sound seems amplified.

The rumbling again, just outside the tent flaps now.

"Some honeymoon," Therese says, and they both laugh in the darkness, like terrified children.

There are two Land Rovers.

Frank will be driving one of them, Davey the other. The Cantoris, suspecting that Frank is the more experienced of the two Great White Hunters, if only because he is the older, are already waiting in his car after breakfast, innocent smiles on their faces.

"Ready for a little excitement?" Davey asks Therese.

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She and Jeremy climb into the back seat of the vehicle. The top is open. Jeremy wonders aloud if this is safe. "Won't animals be able to jump inside?"

"Don't worry, Doc," Davey says. "You're in good hands."

The lead car is pulling out of the campsite. The native workers are carrying buckets of water up from the river to the cook tent, where they will heat it for the canvas sacks above the shower stalls. As Jeremy understands this, they will shower only in the evenings, before dinner and after the day's game drives. For their morning ablutions, their two tent boys will carry steaming water to the sink just outside the sleeping tent.

All of the sleeping tents—those for the two safari owners, those for the safari guests—are set up in one corner of the camp, not five yards away from each other. The mess tent is in the center of the camp, the cook tent on the far end, closest to the river. There is another small tent Frank calls the "library," full of literature about Africa. As they drive out of camp, two men in the cook tent are busily stripping some sort of animal.

"Impala for dinner tonight," Davey says, swinging in behind Frank's car. "Ever taste impala, Terry?"

"No," she says.

"Delicious. Bet there are lots of delicious things you've never tasted," he says, turning from the wheel to look back at her and smile.

"You know," she says, "I'm sorry, but nobody ever calls me Terry."

"Hey, *I'm* sorry," he says. "Thought that was your name."

"My wife's name is Therese," Jeremy says.

"Therese, got it, Doc," Davey says, and winks at him in the rear view mirror.

"And I wish you wouldn't call me Doc. That was for med school."

"Sorry, guys," Davey says. "Let's just have some fun here, okay?"

In all his years as a physician, Jeremy has delivered only one baby, and that while he was still interning at Beth Israel in New York City. Today, on the endless plain of the Masai Mara, where sudden death is a minute-by-minute possibility, an impala gives birth before their very eyes.

The Land Rover is not five feet from her as she squeezes the newborn from her loins, and licks it clean. She raises her head. Her long ears begin twitching. Her nostrils twitch as well. They are close enough to see her wet nose, her nostrils. And then, to their immense surprise, she moves off, leaving the newborn lying in the

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tall grass, as still as any rock, unable to see or to walk, seemingly helpless.

"There are probably cheetah out hunting," Davey explains. "The mother will be back for her tomorrow. Better and safer not to draw attention to her now."

At dinner that night, Therese can't stop worrying about the baby impala.

"Will the mother know where to find her?" she asks.

"Oh, sure," Frank says. "Besides, she won't have any scent for maybe two, three months. The predators won't be able to . . ."

"Oh, please," Therese says, "don't even suggest it!"

"She'll be all right, don't worry, hon," Helen says reassuringly and pats Therese's hand.

"She was so adorable," Therese says. "I'd like to take her home with me."

"Take me home instead," Davey says.

There is a silence at the table.

"I'd make a lovely pet," he adds, and this time Helen and Lou laugh at what they realize is a joke.

Davey grins like an adolescent boy.

Shrugs.

Lifts his wine glass in a silent toast to everyone at the table.

"Do you have any children at home?" Frank asks, possibly trying to change the subject; Jeremy can't be certain.

"We've only been married since September," he says.

"Really?" Helen says. "Lou, do you hear this? They're newly-weds."

"In fact, this is a delayed honeymoon," Jeremy explains. "I couldn't get away in the fall."

Therese takes his hand on the table top, squeezes it.

"Oh, how sweet," Davey says.

Therese is afraid to go to the toilet in the middle of the night because she will have to cross five feet of open space to get to the primitive hole in the ground, and she is fearful wild animals may be marching around the camp, despite the Masai guards with their spears. Jeremy accompanies her to the toilet before they turn in for the night, waiting outside the small canvas enclosure for her, and then escorting her back to the sleeping tent again.

In the dark, in the personal privacy of their own tent, they begin whispering again. This is only their second night out, but they have come to realize that the sole privacy they will ever have is

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here in this tent, and in the shower stall behind it, and in the little toilet hut alongside that.

"He makes me uncomfortable," Therese whispers.

"Yes, me too."

"His remarks are so inappropriate."

"Yes."

"Is it something I'm doing?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Maybe I should stop wearing shorts."

"Honey, you can wear whatever you like, whenever . . ."

"I don't *want* his attentions, Jere. I don't *want* his goddamn innuendoes . . ."

"Shhh, shhh."

The canvas walls are terribly thin. Whenever they rustle with the slightest vagrant wind, Jeremy is sure it's a lion rubbing against them.

"I feel so helpless," Therese says.

"Yes."

"I mean, we're in the middle of the jungle . . ."

"The plain."

". . . and they're supposed to be here protecting us and making sure . . ."

"Yes."

"But instead, he keeps hitting on me!"

They are silent for a very long time.

"Do you want to go home?" Jeremy asks at last.

"How can we do that?"

"I'll just tell Frank we want to leave."

"He won't return our money, you know."

"I know."

"There's a 'no-refund' clause . . ."

"I know. But it's only money, Therese."

She nods, says nothing for several moments.

"All this way for nothing," she says at last.

"All this way."

"Jere, am I imagining all this? I mean, he really *is* . . ."

"Yes, he really is."

He hears her sigh heavily in the darkness.

"Let's see how it goes tomorrow," she says.

Far out on the plain, they hear the sound of some poor creature being torn to shreds, its shrieks sundering the night.

The two Land Rovers are parked side by side.

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In the near distance, a pair of cheetah are stalking a herd of wildebeest.

Frank has set up camp chairs for the entire party, and they are observing the hunt through binoculars.

"We'll have wildebeest one night this week," Davey says to Therese. "I'll ask the chef to prepare it specially for you." When she does not answer, he says, as if answering himself, "Thank you, Davey, that's very kind of you."

"Why can't we get closer to them?" Helen asks.

"Scare off the herd," Frank explains. "We're not here to disturb the daily ebb and flow of life."

"I don't know about you," Helen says, "but *I'm* here on vacation."

"Sorry, no can do," Frank says.

And at that moment, a Land Rover from another safari pulls up not twenty feet from where the stalking cheetah sit silently watchful.

"How come *they* can do it?" Helen asks, pouting.

"Doesn't make it right," Frank says.

"I agree with her," Therese says. "We should move up closer."

"If you want to get close to some predators," Davey says, leaning in toward her, virtually whispering in her ear, "I'll take you out early one morning."

Therese does not answer.

Before dinner that night, they sit ranged behind the roaring fire, facing the starry plain and the unseen eyes out there, drinking what Davey and Frank call "Sundowners." Davey takes a poke at the fire, tosses the branch onto the flaming pyramid, and walks back to where Jeremy and Therese are sitting side by side, holding hands, looking out past the fire to the plain. He takes the camp chair on Therese's right. He is silent for a moment, and then he leans in close to her.

"When would you like to see those predators?" he whispers.

"I wouldn't," Therese says.

Davey shrugs.

"The offer stands open, sweetheart," he says, and smiles knowingly.

"Tomorrow night, we'll be having fresh fish for dinner," Frank announces.

"Best fish in the world," Davey says.

"World's largest freshwater fish," Frank says.

"The Nile perch."

"Chris should be here bright and early . . ."

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"Chris?" Helen says.

"Our charter pilot," Frank says. "The one who flew us here."

"Bald guy, blue eyes?" Lou asks.

"That's Chris. We should be in Lake Victoria and on the water by nine, nine thirty. A break for lunch at the hotel on Rusinga Island, then out on the water again, and back home in the afternoon."

"To cook up the fish," Davey says, and licks his lips. "Yummy, yummy, yummy," he says to Therese.

In the dead of night, Jeremy and Therese pack their bags. They have not brought much luggage to the Masai Mara, a single bag each, and so packing is an easy task.

Their plan is a simple one.

At breakfast tomorrow morning, they will tell Frank and his partner that they are leaving the safari. Frank will undoubtedly protest that they've only been out three days, and even so they've seen a plentiful amount of game, it's rare that anyone spots the Big Three in so short a time, but they've already seen cheetah, leopard, and lion—lion in abundance, in fact, so what's the great hurry? Give Africa a chance.

Jeremy will explain that they're not used to roughing it this way. He will explain that what they'd like to do is check into the hotel on Rusinga, stay there for a few days, make their leisurely way back to Nairobi on their own . . .

Frank will undoubtedly remind them that the price of the safari is non-refundable . . .

Yes, Jeremy will say, we realize that. But we've made up our minds.

By the light of their single flickering kerosene lamp, Jeremy rehearses what he will say tomorrow morning. When he finishes, Therese claps her hands.

Like giddy midnight conspirators, they begin giggling, and then fall into bed together.

The next morning, Therese takes one look at her husband and says, "My God, what happened to you?"

In the mirror, Jeremy's left eye is swollen to the size of a golf ball. He suspects some insect, most likely a spider, has bitten him during the night, and he goes immediately to his traveling medical kit. There, among the Tylenol and the Seconal, there among the pills for nausea or diarrhea or constipation, there among the adhesive bandages and the sterile gauze pads, he finds some alcohol swabs, and cleans the swollen eye, and then dabs it with Neosporin ointment.

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Looking at himself in the mirror again, he thinks, I don't even look like myself anymore.

But their bags are packed, and in a little while the plane will be here, and they'll be out of here, they'll be leaving the Masai Mara, leaving Nairobi, leaving Kenya, leaving Africa.

He smiles at his own image, and then winces because the damn eye hurts.

"We won't be going to Lake Victoria today," Frank announces at breakfast. "Nor any other day this week."

"But it's part of the itinerary," Helen reminds him.

"Yes, I know, and we'll make an adjustment in the tour price. But I just spoke to Chris on the radio . . ."

"I had my heart set on fishing," Lou says.

"It's part of the itinerary," Helen says again.

"I'm sorry, but there's something wrong with the fuel lines on his plane, and he's had to take it into the shop. He doesn't think it'll be fixed till the end of the week, when it's time for you to go back to Nairobi. I'm sorry."

"Then get another plane," Jeremy says.

"No, I can't do that," Frank says.

"Why not?"

"These charter planes are expensive. They're all figured into the price. I have an arrangement with Chris. I can't just go to another company . . ."

"You said you'd make an adjustment," Helen reminds him.

"Yes, but . . ."

"So use the adjustment to charter another plane," Jeremy says.

"No, that would be prohibitive, I'm sorry. No can do."

"Looks like we're stuck right here for the next little while," Davey says, and grins impishly. Shrugging, he picks up his fork and stabs it into the eggs on his plate. Yellow spreads like a stain.

"We'll just have to make our own fun," he says.

A pair of giraffe are eating from thorn trees.

Three giant secretary birds lope across the plain.

A tiny baby elephant rushes from behind the protective cover of his mother's thick legs to charge their Land Rover, trumpeting like a bull, and then hurries back to hide behind his mother again.

Elegant crested cranes spread their wings, glide to a stop just feet from where a herd of Cape buffalo scowl in seeming disapproval.

But always there is the incessant, insinuating, intimidating presence of David Lawrence Ladd.

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The Land Rover is parked some fifty feet from where a pair of lions are mating. Everywhere on the plain, there are mating lions. They couple, they collapse to the ground to rest, they couple again.

"That's the life, huh?" Davey says, and turns to grin at Therese.

On this fourth day of the safari, Therese ignores him completely.

Like the Masai women who walk across the Mara to market in neighboring villages, their heads high, their shoulders back, seemingly impervious to the threat of stalking predators, Therese simply ignores him—until it becomes completely impossible to do so.

That afternoon, they make a point of placing themselves in the Land Rover Frank will be driving. The Cantoris don't seem to appreciate this too much, but their day brightens considerably when they spot, up close, two sleeping leopards in a tree, and—not ten minutes later—witness six hunting lionesses stalking and killing a huge Cape buffalo.

"A kill!" Lou trumpets. "We actually witnessed a kill!"

As evening approaches, they are all walking along a narrow trail beside a deep pond where earlier this morning, they watched hippos splashing and romping in the water. They are following the track of what Frank tells them is a cheetah. Jeremy asks if it's wise for them to be walking around in the open. But Frank assures them they will be perfectly safe. He himself is carrying a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight, and Davey, of course, has his trusty Glock.

They are walking single file.

Frank in the lead, his rifle at the ready.

Then Helen.

Then Therese.

Then Davey.

And Lou.

And last in line, Jeremy, who is anxiously watching both sides of the trail, alert to every sound.

Up ahead, Therese suddenly stops dead in her tracks.

She turns to look sharply at Davey, and then immediately walks back past him, and past Lou, to where Jeremy is bringing up the rear of the line.

"What is it?" he says.

She shakes her head.

She does not tell him what happened until they are alone later

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in their tent. Outside, the sky has already begun to surrender to the brilliance of another African sunset.

"He touched me," she whispers. "He ran his hand up the inside of my leg."

"I'll go talk to him," Jeremy says.

"Be careful," she warns, but he has already stormed out of the tent.

The two men are silhouetted against the changing sky.

Lou Cantori has a very tall, very dark drink in his right hand. He still can't get over having witnessed an actual kill. He can't wait to show his friends back home the movie he took. Davey seems to be listening intently, smiling as he piles tinder and logs onto what will become their nightly fire. As Jeremy purposefully approaches, there is a sudden caterwauling out on the plain.

"What the hell is *that?*" Lou asks.

Davey throws another log onto the heap. Seemingly addressing Lou, he says, "Probably some young lion trying to take a female from the pride. The patriarch is letting him know he won't let it happen." He kicks the log into place with his booted foot. "But it will, eventually. He can roar all he wants out there, but the young lion'll take over the pride anyway, sooner or later." He stoops before the heap of stacked logs, strikes a match, touches it to the tinder. The fire leaps into flame. He looks up from it, directly into Jeremy's eyes. "That's the way it is out here, Dr. Palmer," he says.

There is an unmistakable challenge in his eyes.

I have touched your wife, those eyes say.

And I will touch her again.

Jeremy stares back into those eyes.

He is thinking, You're twenty-five years younger than I am, my friend.

And you're in great physical shape.

And you carry a 9-millimeter Glock in a holster on your hip.

But . . .

"Better check on my bride. See you guys at dinner," Lou says, and ambles off toward his tent.

The flames leap higher, seeming to ignite the sky itself with unimaginable reds, yellows, and oranges.

Without preamble, Jeremy says, "Stay away from my wife."

"What?" Davey says, and turns from the fire, a surprised look on his face.

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"Your attentions are unwanted and unsolicited. You are making both of us extremely uncomfortable . . ."

"Hey, Doc, back off a minute, okay?" Davey says, and holds up his hands as if to fend off an imminent blow. "What attentions?"

"Davey, I'm not interested in any of your bullshit, truly," Jeremy says. "If you ever touch her again . . ."

"Touch her? Are you . . . ?"

"Stay away from her, Davey! Don't sit near her, don't talk to her, don't make any more sexual remarks to her . . ."

"Sexual, *Jesus!*"

"Just keep the hell away from her!"

He is talking louder than he realized. Across the compound, he sees Lou Cantori stop before his tent and turn to look at them.

"Do you think you have that?" Jeremy whispers.

Davey says nothing.

"Have I made myself clear?" Jeremy whispers.

"Why, sure, Doc," Davey says, and grins.

Jeremy is sitting outside the tent on their so-called verandah, thoughtfully silent, when Therese comes to him. She is wearing a white robe and carrying a white bar of soap. Her feet are bare.

"Did you talk to him?" she asks.

"Yes."

"Did he understand?"

"I think so. I hope so."

She shakes her head.

"I wish this weren't happening to us," she says.

"It'll be over soon," he says.

"Worst week in my life. Ever."

"Yes," he says.

She bends to him, kisses him on the cheek.

"I love you so much," she says.

"I love you, too, darling."

She kisses him again. "I'm going to shower," she says. "Make a drink for me, will you?"

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I'll be okay, it's still light." She turns to go, comes back to him, brushes her hand across his cheek. "Are you all right?" she asks.

"Yes," he says. "I'm fine."

She nods.

"I hate him for this," she says.

"I do, too."

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"But it'll be over soon," she says, repeating his words.

"Yes, soon, darling."

He eases himself out of the camp chair.

"Gin and tonic?" he asks.

"Please."

He starts up for the mess tent. The fire is crackling and hissing. Davey is nowhere in sight now. The evening sky is a symphony in brass.

Therese walks through their sleeping tent to the back flaps, and then crosses the five feet or so to the shower stall. Inside the stall, she takes off her robe and reaches through the flap to hang it on a peg outside.

The water from the Mara River is thick and brown. The safari boys lug it in buckets to the cook tent, where they heat it in huge cauldrons and then carry it to the separate shower stalls clustered behind each of the sleeping tents. There, they pour the water into the canvas sacks above each of the stalls. Inside the shower, you pull a chain to unleash a flow of warm water, soaking yourself. You release the chain, and it cuts off the downpour. You soap yourself clean, and pull the chain again to rinse yourself.

I have touched your wife, those eyes say.

Standing on the narrow wooden planking underfoot, Therese pulls the chain now, and lets loose a splash of water. Releasing the chain to stop the flow, she begins soaping herself. Her long hair wet, her body wet and covered now with suds, she is reaching for the chain again, when the flap to the shower stall is suddenly thrown back.

"Well, well, well," Davey says. "What have we here!"

"Get away from me," she says.

"Sorry, I thought the stall was empty."

"Get *away* from me," she says again.

"Sure you don't want me to join you?" he says, and reaches in to touch her breast. She is too startled to scream. She throws the bar of soap at him, full into his face, hitting him over the eye with it. Grinning, he backs away. "See you at dinner," he says. "Nice tits, by the way." Still grinning, he lets the flap fall free of his hand.

Therese stands naked and glistening, covered with soap, gulping in huge breaths of air. At last, she pulls the chain to rinse herself in muddy river water.

When she tells Jeremy what just happened, he merely nods.

That is all.

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For dinner that night, the chef serves wildebeest.

"There are people all over the world who prefer it to beef," Davey says. "I asked the chef to prepare it specially for you, Therese." When she makes no reply, he goes through his routine again, saying to himself, "Why, thank you, Davey, that was very kind of you." Therese is deliberately sitting very far away from him, on the opposite side of the mess tent table, between Lou and Frank.

Helen proposes a game.

The idea is to describe yourself by attaching an adjective to your first name.

Frank picks up on it at once.

He's had a bit too much to drink.

"Fearless Frank," he says.

"Lucky Lou," Lou says.

"Happy Helen."

Therese hesitates.

"Tired Therese," she says at last.

Davey, too, has been drinking.

"Dominant Dave," he says, and raises his wine glass in a silent toast to Therese, and then turns his head and his smile toward Jeremy.

Jeremy is cold sober.

His eyes meet Davey's.

"Jugular Jere," he says, and everyone bursts out laughing because they don't know what he can possibly mean.

"Come on, partner," Frank says. "Let's put you to bed before you fall on your face."

At two in the morning, one of the Masai guards sounds the alarm. Jeremy is already awake when Frank rushes into the tent and yells, "Dr. Palmer, come quick! Something terrible has happened!"

What has happened is that Dominant Dave has put his own 9-millimeter Glock in his mouth and blown off the back of his head.

The movie has ended. The cabin of the jumbo jet is temporarily dim. In the darkness, Jeremy and his wife continue whispering, their heads close together.

"Frank thinks he may have had a drinking problem," Therese says.

"Maybe."

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"He certainly drank enough that night."

Jeremy says nothing.

"Maybe he wouldn't have done it otherwise."

"Maybe not," Jeremy says.

"Anyway, it's over," she says. "It's all behind us now."

"Yes," Jeremy says. "It's all behind us now."

He takes her hand in his own. He puts his mouth very close to her ear.

"Therese," he whispers, "he wasn't drunk."

"Yes, he was," she whispers. "Didn't you see him?"

"Therese . . . he was drugged."

"What do you mean?"

"Seconal. Two hundred milligrams."

"What are you saying?"

Her whisper is a sharp hiss in the stillness of the cabin. Beneath it, the jet engines drone incessantly.

"In his wine," Jeremy whispers. "Two big reds. Enough to knock him out completely."

His wife is staring at him now.

"I went to his tent later. I put the gun in his mouth, I put his thumb on the trigger. I blew out his brains, Therese."

Her eyes are wide open in the gloom of the cabin.

"I killed him," Jeremy whispers.

She is silent for merely an instant.

Then she says, "Good," and smiles, and squeezes his hand.

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THE DESTRUCTION OF A GODDESS

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

Bodies never lie.

—Martha Graham

Vi sat in the back row of the Performing Arts Center, her clipboard on the seat beside her. She wasn't taking notes. There was no point. Everything was wrong. She shook her head, wishing she had never agreed to this job.

The piano was out of tune, and the accompanist was massacring "To Life," one of the best-loved numbers in *Fiddler on the Roof.* No one was singing—this was a dance rehearsal—but someone should have been, at least to cover up the noise.

On stage, four grown men were attempting the low kicks of a kazatski dance. Their hands were on the ground for balance while they kicked outwardly with their feet. The move was harder than it looked; it took great strength and coordination.

The dancers were in their forties, and two had never danced before. They were surrounded by a group of men of varying ages (none of whom could dance) and the show's star, Guy Stephens. He was thin and trim—which he should not have been for the role of Tevye—and he could probably do the Russian folk dance the men were attempting. But Tevye was an observer in this scene, not a participant.

Vi rubbed her nose with her thumb and forefinger. Another headache was coming on. She had twelve weeks to whip these men into shape. Twelve weeks to do the impossible.

If only the Jetty Street Theater Company hadn't chosen *Fiddler*

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as its spring musical. If only the company had had enough common sense to bring in a few professional dancers, besides her. If only, if only.

She had tried to explain to the company's creative director that any musical with Jerome Robbins choreography would be impossible for a repertory company to do well. He cited example after example of companies doing Robbins's shows, from *West Side Story* to *Fiddler.*

But she knew better. She'd seen some of those performances and the dance was also adequate at best, excruciating at worst.

Robbins copyrighted his choreography, and the shows which featured his work on Broadway also insisted that the local rep company use the same choreography. It made performing works like *Fiddler* difficult at the local level, and impossible when the dancers were middle-aged men who'd never high-kicked before.

If Paloma was going to die, she was going to die at someone else's hand.

"Miss Hodel?" The male voice was nearly hidden by the pounding chords of the piano.

She looked sideways. A man stood in darkness near the doorway. He wore a rumpled raincoat and he was tall. His face was in shadow.

"Can it wait?" she asked. "This is a rehearsal."

He glanced at the stage just as one of the so-called Russian dancers fell flat on his back. "How long do I have to wait?" he asked. "I'm still a young man."

She suppressed a smile. "I suppose I can give them five."

Then she stood and clapped her hands. The dancers stopped immediately, but the accompanist didn't hear. Guy had to reach down from his pretend barstool and tap her on the shoulder to get her to stop playing.

"Get some water, do some stretches," Vi said. "When I come back in about ten minutes, we're going to go through this step by step."

The men groaned. The dancer on the floor continued to lay there, and Vi wondered if he had hurt himself. Well, if he had, someone would tell her.

Dance wasn't supposed to be easy, after all. Some said it was impossible. It certainly was the most difficult athletic endeavor human beings could attempt. These men weren't starting with the muscle-stretching exercises of first-year ballet. They were starting with Jerome Robbins stage work, designed for the best dancers on Broadway.

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The five hundred dollars per week she was charging the rep—an amount she'd originally agonized over, knowing how poor the company was—was beginning to look more and more like an honorarium than payment for her services.

"How can I help you?" she said to the man in the shadows.

"Is there some place private?" he asked.

She wasn't about to go anywhere private with a man she didn't know. "What's this about?"

He stepped into the row. His face was angular, his skin a burnished gold that no tanning company could ever achieve. His dark gray eyes were so heavily fringed that Vi bet every woman he met was envious of them.

"My name is Zack Tate," he said. "I'm with the Portland Police Department. I was told you're the person to talk with about dance."

Vi let out a small laugh. "There are hundreds of people to talk to in Portland. Did you just need an excuse for a vacation at the coast?"

"I wish," he said. "Can we talk?"

She sighed. "Let me see your identification, Officer Tate, and then—"

"Detective."

"Detective Tate. Then we'll go to the office, such as it is."

He flipped open a wallet that held his badge and another piece of identification, which she didn't bother to look at. She did, however, study the badge. She'd been in enough theatrical productions to know what a fake badge looked like. A real one was heavier, with the city's logo on it, and a number engraved at the bottom.

"All right," she said, and made her way to the aisle. Her knee ached. She had been sitting too long. She left her clipboard behind her, marking her spot.

Tate stepped into the aisle. When she reached him, he extended a hand as if he wanted to help her. So he was observant. Most people didn't notice her limp right away.

She ignored the hand, and used the back of a nearby seat to help her keep her balance on the inclined floor. Tate shoved his hands in the pockets of his raincoat and kept pace with her. He was even taller than she had initially thought, but he bent his body into a kind of S, as if his height embarrassed him.

When they reached the carpeted lobby outside the theater, she repeated, "What's this about?"

"Paloma Kitani."

Vi rolled her eyes as she led him past the potted ferns to the tiny office. "What did she do now?"

"Hadn't you heard? She was murdered, Ms. Hodel."

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Vi stopped. Somehow her hand had come up and covered her mouth. She didn't remember making the gesture. That was odd in and of itself—she usually remembered every movement she made.

"What happened?" she asked through her fingers.

He nodded toward the office. "Let's sit down."

Tate led the way inside. She was almost surprised when he took the seat in front of the presswood desk. She took the seat behind it, feeling as if her entire world had spun out of control.

Paloma Kitani had been a major force in her life. For years, Vi had worked at Paloma's side. Then she and Paloma had what Paloma called "a major falling out," and from that moment on Paloma became someone Vi pushed against, even though they had almost no contact any longer.

"Murdered." Vi shook her head. "How?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Tate said.

"So you came to me because you suspect me?" Her voice was shaking. Her voice hadn't shaken in years.

"No." He spoke slowly, calmly, as if he'd had this discussion a thousand times with a thousand different people. "I came here because I was told you're an expert on dance, and on Ms. Kitani's company in particular."

Vi shook her head. "I don't know anything about Kitani Studios. I haven't lived in Portland in five years, Detective. I worked with Paloma at a different dance company."

"That's not technically true, is it, Ms. Hodel?"

She frowned at him, not understanding. "It's true."

"I thought Kitani Studios used to be Littlefield Dance Company."

Vi sighed. "That's a matter of debate."

"Oh?" He settled in his chair as if he were willing to listen to the entire tedious argument. "In what way?"

"So I'm not a suspect," Vi said.

"No, you're not," Tate said, folding his hands across his stomach.

"How did you rule me out?" Vi asked.

"Actually, the creative director of this place did. He laughed when I called this afternoon, said you hadn't been to Portland in months, and that you were definitely here on Monday night, browbeating the dancers." Tate smiled slightly. "Those were his exact words."

She had been here, trying to get the entire cast to handle the traditional dances of the wedding ceremony. For the cast members, most of whom had never seen a traditional Jewish wedding let alone understood one, every detail seemed suspect. She wasn't going to have any hair left when this production was over.

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"Ms. Hodel?"

She nodded. "I was. I'll probably be here every night for the next fifty years trying to get this right. I'm just glad they didn't decide to put on *A Chorus Line.*"

"You could change the dances."

"No, I can't," she said, unwilling to explain her predicament. "So what happened to Paloma on Monday night?"

"She was killed." His smile was long gone. "You can ask as many questions as you like, Ms. Hodel, but when you're done, I'm still going to ask you about Littlefield Dance Company."

Vi closed her eyes. Even the name of the company was painful. Nothing erased the feelings she had from those days. Time did not make this wound go away.

"Arista Littlefield," Vi said as she opened her eyes, "was considered one of the greatest dancers of her generation, but she was an even better choreographer. She felt stifled in New York, so she came west. She didn't like the dance scene in San Francisco. L.A. was too focused on the movies, and she couldn't take the rain in Seattle, so she settled in Portland."

Tate nodded. He could have gotten this from any book on Arista. Still, he didn't stop Vi from speaking or from telling him what he already knew.

His silence made her even more uncomfortable.

"She started the company, luring principal dancers from some of the better touring companies. Eventually, she formed a school as a wing of the company and cultivated her own dancers. I was her first star."

Vi's voice caught. She cleared her throat. Twenty years old, the world was ahead of her. People who thought of dance as an art always forgot its physical side. Most artists got better as they got older. Dancers fell apart.

"Paloma," she said, forcing herself to go on, "never soloed. She never made it out of the troupe. She wasn't good enough. She only had two years on stage, and then Arista pulled her, which caused problems."

Tate looked surprised. "Really?"

Vi nodded. "It's not in the histories for two reasons. The old histories don't carry it because Paloma was one of a hundred dancers who didn't make the grade. The new ones don't mention it because they were authorized by Paloma."

He frowned. "So how did she become the central figure in Portland's dance scene?"

Vi wished the room were bigger so that she could stand up and

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pace, maybe look out a window as she talked to him. She didn't want him to see her face, to see all the emotions that still lurked there, so many years later.

"Paloma became Arista's lover."

He let out a small whistle.

"Even then," Vi said, "Arista never let her do more than work with the students. Arista knew Paloma had no talent."

"Yet she left her dance company to her."

Vi shook her head. "She made Paloma the beneficiary of her estate. Take a look at the will. I was supposed to be the creative director of the dance company."

"So why aren't you?" He was leaning forward now, clearly intrigued.

"Oh, I was," she said. "For the three months it remained open. That was how long it took to settle Arista's estate. Then Paloma opted to close the company. That caused quite a fuss. You can find it all in the *Oregonian*. The paper was very upset."

"And you?"

Vi shrugged, pretending at a calmness she didn't feel. "I was too."

"So why didn't you sue?"

"On what grounds?" Vi had spent money on a battery of attorneys. She knew this part of the law upside down and backwards. "Paloma had control of the estate. She could do what she felt was best for it. And like most dance companies, Littlefield ran in the red. Not badly in the red, but enough that she could justify closing it."

"But she said the company was exactly the same."

"Well, technically, it can't be," Vi said. "Because if it were, I'd be creative director for life."

He was shaking his head. "Paloma used the Littlefield techniques. She was the only one who performed Arista Littlefield's dances, right?"

Vi looked down at her hands, thick and callused from years of bar work, knuckles enlarged from overuse. How to explain the world of dance to someone who didn't practice it? "She owns the copyrights to all the choreography, yes."

"But?"

"But that's not how dance works."

"How does it work, Ms. Hodel?"

She gave him a small smile. "Come watch, Detective. I'll show you."

Maybe she had thought she could chase him away by making him suffer through rehearsal. Maybe she thought she wouldn't have to talk about Arista any more.

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But it didn't work. Tate stayed to the very end. He sat in the first row and watched as she forced her poor middle-aged wannabe dancers twist their bodies into positions they'd never tried before.

She had minor victories—two of the men managed to cross their arms and high kick at the same time—but mostly she failed. No matter how hard she tried to teach them the maneuvers, the men didn't understand.

It wasn't their fault. The dances were too difficult for them. And she knew, no matter how hard she tried, she wouldn't be able to make her dancers look good.

So she'd have to figure out a way to play the scene for laughs. She mentally apologized to the ghost of Jerome Robbins who, if he were watching, was probably appalled at the way his dances were being abused. But she had no choice.

When rehearsal finished and the would-be dancers collected their things, Tate remained in his seat.

"You want me to stay, Vi?" Guy Stephens asked with real concern.

Vi shook her head. "I'll be all right."

Stephens raised his eyebrows, but didn't argue. He gave Tate a long, warning look. His reaction made Vi feel warm toward him, even though she knew he had done that primarily because he was an actor who had no idea he was facing a cop.

After they left and all but the houselights were off, Tate said, "What was I supposed to learn? That dance is hard? I think I could have figured that out on my own."

Vi sat next to him. Her knee hurt and she was very tired. She had executed the moves she'd wanted the men to do. The dance in this part of *Fiddler* was energetic and lively, celebrating life. She hadn't felt like celebrating life, but the dance had demanded it.

She always did what her art demanded of her.

"Dance," she said, "is a performance art."

Tate nodded, his eyes hooded. For the first time, she felt his impatience.

"But dance, unlike music, has only started to codify its routines. Choreography which has been written down so that someone else can learn it without seeing it performed is less than a hundred years old. Even then, it's not done well."

"Obviously."

"No, you misunderstand," she said. "These men are doing the best they can, and they'll learn the steps. But even if they were the best male dancers on Broadway, they wouldn't do the show correctly."

Tate frowned.

"Choreography lives in the body, and the only way to learn a

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method is through mentoring. Right now, only I and three other dancers know the Littlefield dances. Not just the choreography, but the moves, the grace, the emotion that Arista put into her work. I could make a dancer with talent do one of Arista's dances in Arista's style. Paloma can't—couldn't."

God, Vi hated the change. She still wasn't used to it. Paloma dead, and this cop not telling her how.

"Why not?"

"You saw the movements up there. The detail I concentrated on."

"I thought you were going to break that poor man's arms. He can't support his weight on those and kick."

"I know," she said. "But let's say he could. Should he do it fast or slow? Should the movement be big or small? Should he keep one foot on the ground while the other kicks up or should they both be in the air? Those are personal choices. I can get the answer by watching the filmed version of *Fiddler* but it doesn't matter here. Here all I have to do is make sure the guy doesn't fall flat on his back."

"Again."

"Again," she said.

"So you're telling me that when Paloma threw you out, she destroyed the very thing she was entrusted to keep."

"Yes," Vi said.

"The other three dancers who knew it . . . ?"

"Didn't stay either. She ran them off."

"I don't understand. Why would she do that?"

"The school," Vi said. "That's where the company made its money. Paloma realized that she could avoid touring, perform in Portland only, and keep expenses down. She also claimed to be Arista's protégée, and even though we all deny that, she says it's just sour grapes. She's destroyed most of the records of her dancing days."

Tate put his hands behind his head and looked at the darkened stage.

"With that kind of pedigree, she can—could—bring in students to this prestigious school, the only place that supposedly teaches the Littlefield method, and then charge them a lot of money. For the first time, the company is making a profit."

"That's a good thing, right?"

Vi's smile was small. "For Paloma, maybe. For dance, it means that no one else can perform Arista's work. I'm barred from it. So are the others. Paloma wouldn't license any of Arista's signature dances to another company, so Arista is fast becoming a footnote

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when ten years ago, she was one of the most important people in modern dance."

"I'm sure that made folks angry," Tate said.

"Yes," she said. "The other three were as furious as I was. We talked about every option we could. But Susanna had gotten work dancing in San Francisco and had to leave. Catherine and Trina had to find work as well. They were all lucky. They could still dance."

She sighed. Tate watched her closely.

"We weren't the only ones who were angry," she said, realizing she sounded defensive, but unable to think of a different way to give him the information he needed. "I can point to a hundred different articles, from the *New Yorker* to the *San Francisco Chronicle* that prove you right. But there's nothing anyone can do. Paloma is in charge of the estate."

"Was," Tate said. "Who is now?"

Vi frowned. "I have no idea. There was some predecease condition that made everything go to the company, but the company's gone. I suppose everything goes to Paloma's heirs, if she has any."

"Does she?"

Vi shrugged. "I never heard her mention family. Once she inherited from Arista, she kept her own sexual preferences quiet. In Portland, no self-respecting parent would knowingly send a student to a school with a gay teacher."

"So no lovers?"

"None that I know of, but I moved here."

He hadn't taken his gaze off the stage. "Why here? Why not New York or San Francisco or Denver, some place with a good modern dance company?"

Vi felt her face flush. The anger, which was always near the surface when she talked about this, made her clench her fists. "I was forbidden to use Littlefield techniques."

"So?"

This time, she wasn't trapped in the small office. This time, she could stand as the emotion took her, and she did. "Except for a few years in ballet school, I was trained by Arista. Everything I know, I learned from her. Anything I taught could be considered the Littlefield method."

"How would anyone know?"

"You mean, if I taught in Chicago, how would Paloma know what methods I was using?"

"Yes."

"I never got a chance to find out. Every time I applied for a job,

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Paloma told them my history and that she wouldn't let anyone teach the method outside of her studio. Which led to questions about why wasn't I teaching there."

"And why weren't you?"

"I told you."

"What did she say?"

"She said that I had run the company into the red, that I knew nothing of the real method, and that I was all hype and no talent."

"Surely they knew she was wrong."

"There was a company in Boston that wanted me. She told them she'd sue them if they hired me."

"Because?"

"Because she knew I'd teach the Littlefield method. They got the message and they spread the word. No one offered me work."

"So you came to the coast?"

"I had a house here. I inherited it from my parents. I could live almost for free. I had some money saved. I survived."

"But you can't do what you want," Tate said.

Vi walked to the edge of the stage, and ran her hand along the lip. She had never performed on a stage this small. If she were dancing here, she'd feel restricted, unable to float across the stage in her usual leaps and bounds.

Or what had been her usual leaps and bounds, back in the days when she was so lithe, so supple, she felt as if she could fly.

"I have a studio here," she said. "It's small, but it works. I teach dance, and I help at the schools."

"I thought you said you couldn't teach."

"Not at a major company. But here—well, Paloma didn't care about here. No one does."

Somehow she said that without bitterness. Maybe she was growing, changing. Maybe she had put more behind her than she had thought.

"It must have been difficult to make the transition."

She bowed her head. "Dancers always know the transition is coming. So few find work doing anything related to dance. I'm lucky in some ways."

"Do you really believe that?"

She nodded. She did believe it. She had just thought such a small life would never be hers. Somehow she had always imagined that she would be as grand as Arista, making her mark upon the world, even though she had never been a good choreographer—she didn't have the imagination.

"So," he said, "this is why they told me to come to you."

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"What is?" she asked.

"This history of the company. All that you keep in your mind."

Vi shook her head. "Others know this."

"But you know the dances."

"Yes." She continued to trace the lip. The wood was soft under her fingers. "Are you going tell me how she died?"

"Tomorrow," he said. "I'd like to meet with you tomorrow, and I'll give you the details then."

"I'd like to know now."

"No, you don't," he said. "Right now, even knowing that she died, you'll be able to sleep tonight."

"But I won't if I learn how?"

"Most people don't handle death well," he said.

"I'm not most people."

"I'm beginning to realize that." He was silent for a long time, and she understood that he wasn't going to say any more, no matter how much she pushed him. He was staying close-mouthed about Paloma's death for a reason, and Vi wasn't sure she wanted to know what that reason was.

Tate's chair squeaked. She recognized the sound. He was standing up. He came up beside her, so close that she could smell his aftershave—faint and spicy.

"You danced tonight," he said.

"No," she said. "I taught tonight."

He shook his head. He was staring at the stage as if the performers were still there. As she gazed up at him, she saw his eyes move—following the imaginary dance across the set.

"You danced," he said. "You can barely walk, yet you did the entire routine up there. Didn't it hurt?"

She smiled at him. "You haven't been around dance very long, have you?"

"No," he said. "Why?"

"Because it always hurts, Detective." She pushed away from the stage. "No matter what you do, it always hurts."

The drive home seemed to take longer than usual. Hers was the only car on the road, and as she drove, she watched the ocean. The night had a luminescence, and she could see the waves, dark against the somewhat lighter sky.

This part of the coast was made up of small towns, all linked by a single ribbon of highway. The theater was in one town, and Vi lived in the next, if a community of two hundred people constituted a town.

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Her home stood on Stony Point, a headland that jutted into the ocean and, with Rocky Point to the south, framed the harbor. On stormy nights, the wind was strongest there—with nothing to block the wind's power for thousands of miles.

The house had originally been a beach cottage, designed for the occasional weekend visit. But when her parents had died—back in the days when she'd been the principal dancer at Littlefield, and Littlefield had been the hot company on the West Coast—she had remodeled the house.

It was still small. The downstairs was one large room. A countertop and a row of cabinets divided the kitchen from the dining room, and a staircase divided the dining room from the living room. The west, south, and north walls were mostly windows, thick double panes that did not rattle too badly in the wind.

The only bedroom was upstairs. She had added a balcony off the western wall so that she could sit outside at night and stare at the stars.

She loved it here. If she hadn't, she might have fought harder for her position in the world. But she had a refuge, a place to hide, and somehow that was more important to her than fighting Paloma and her lies.

Paloma, who was dead. Murdered.

Even with all their differences, Vi never thought anyone would murder Paloma. But now that the detective had told her about it, the death made perfect sense. If Paloma was going to die young, she was going to die at someone else's hand.

Vi went to the entry in the back of the house and dug through her box of recycled newspapers. She hadn't been reading the *Oregonian* lately, although she'd subscribed. She'd stayed in bed long on mornings after rehearsal, nursing her knee. Despite her brave statement to Tate, the pain she'd been feeling was bothering her. It seemed to be growing worse, and she didn't want to think about what that meant.

She carried the papers from the last two weeks to the sofa. Then she turned on the gas fireplace, poured herself a glass of wine, and started the search.

The article was on the front page of the Metro section, about ten days before.

FAMOUS DANCER MURDERED
Paloma Kitani Found in Studio

Vi read the article, and the follow-ups that ran for the rest of the

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week. Somehow, seeing the words in hard cold print made Paloma's death real.

Hard to believe a woman that vibrant, that strong, could be gone.

Vi almost felt as if she were toppling forward, as if she'd been pushing against Paloma for her entire adult life, and now that wall, that immovable wall that had been Paloma, was gone.

Vi could go back to work at a real studio. She didn't need to worry that Paloma would sue her or attack her or try to destroy her.

In so many ways, Vi had her life back. Her old life.

She shook off the thought. Paloma was dead. The last thing Vi should be considering was herself.

She learned little from the articles. They were as vague as Tate had been about the method of death. Apparently it had been unique, and the police were withholding that information.

The articles did say that Paloma had been in the studio alone. The last people to see Paloma alive had been her students. She had had a late-night class. The parents had picked up the students, said their good-byes to Paloma, and no one saw her after that.

Until one of the principal dancers had arrived to teach the early morning dance class. She had unlocked the building and found Paloma's body.

The newspaper said the dancer had been so distraught that she had to be sedated.

Vi set the paper down. She stared into the gas flame, burning steady and even in the small fireplace. What happened when a woman like Paloma left the world? Did the world become a better place? Or would all the nasty things that Paloma had done live past her?

Paloma hadn't been a bad woman, not initially. Shy, frightened, beautiful in that wispy way so many ballerinas had. Wispy, even though their slender frames actually had great strength.

When she had become Arista's lover, she had been so insecure that she used to welcome Arista's verbal battering. Once Vi had found Paloma alone in the studio, sitting beneath the bar, her back to the mirrors, sobbing.

I'll never be good enough, she had said.

Vi hadn't had a response to that. She had known that Paloma was right. There was an element to dance, one that people rarely spoke of. Dance was a craft which could be learned, but to be truly great required physical talent, a talent that lived within the body and had to be nurtured.

Paloma was good enough to be a company dancer, but she did

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not have the ability to go beyond that, no matter how hard she tried. It was clear in all the missed steps, the flawed leaps, the slow way that she learned.

Arista had loved her for her imperfections. Surrounded by talent and egos, Arista had seen Paloma as an unusual element, not realizing the potential for destruction being sown in that young, idealistic girl.

Sometimes Vi thought the company had crushed Paloma long before Arista died. Paloma's soul had been destroyed, and in the end, she had no choice but to seek revenge.

And now this.

Vi picked up the newspapers and took them back to her recycling bin. Her life was different now because of Arista. Because of Paloma.

And no amount of wishing could change that.

Detective Tate arrived at the house promptly at ten. He brought a baker's box filled with donuts. They were still warm, and their scent made Vi's stomach rumble. She hadn't allowed herself donuts since she started to dance seriously.

She had made coffee and she had fresh fruit that she was going to offer him, but it felt churlish to reject the donuts. She took a plain one, felt the greasy coating beneath her fingers, and set it on a small plate. She handed another plate to Tate, who took it with an expression of bemusement.

He poured himself some coffee, added cream but no sugar, and carried the cup into the dining area. He stood at the windows for a long time, looking at the ocean.

"You have a beautiful home," he said. Vi thought she heard a touch of envy in his voice.

"Thank you."

"I'd expected to see pictures of dancers, photographs, memories. There's none of that. At least down here."

And none upstairs either. Her memories were packed in boxes and hidden in the attic space above the garage, probably mildewing in the salty air.

"I like the house the way it is," she said.

He nodded, sipped his coffee, and stared at the waves. They were large, frothy, demanding. A storm was brewing out at sea.

She ate her donut, almost self-consciously. She had so trained herself that anything filled with fat, sugar, and starch was bad for her that an indulgence felt like a sin.

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One was more than enough. Tate didn't eat any. She felt bad that the donuts were going to waste.

"You said you had more to talk with me about," she said after a while.

"I wanted to wait until you'd eaten." He turned around, then sat down at the dining room table, facing the ocean, as if he couldn't get enough of it. "I double-checked what you told me last night."

"I expected you would."

"I had trouble believing you would accept a small life here on the coast."

She nodded. A lot of her friends hadn't believed it either.

"Then I saw this house and view. It's making more sense this morning."

She sat in the captain's chair at the head of the table. She put her feet on a nearby bench and leaned back, cradling her cup. Sitting like that, she could see the ocean as well, and the bank of clouds that were forming on the horizon.

"I thought you said I wasn't a suspect."

He glanced at her. "You should have been. You lost the most, it seemed to me. But you were here that night, seen by dozens of people. It's a two-hour trip to Portland, and even by the coroner's most liberal estimates, Ms. Kitani was already dead by the time you left rehearsal."

"How did she die?" Vi asked.

"That's what I want your help on," he said.

She raised her eyebrows.

"You'll see when I show you the photos."

"Photos? Of her body?"

He nodded, then got up and walked out to his car. When he came back, he was carrying a manila envelope.

"These are difficult," he said, "but I need someone who specializes in dance to see them. I showed them to the head of the Portland Ballet, but she said that someone who knew Arista Littlefield's work would be best suited to discuss them."

He set the envelope down. Vi looked at it, a light rectangle against her dark oak table.

"What happened?" Vi asked, not touching the envelope.

"Someone surprised her," he said. "The office was a mess—not the kind a thief leaves, but one that suggests a fight. A chair was knocked over, all of the stuff on top of the desk had been swept to the floor, but not touched. As if someone had done it in a fit of anger."

Paloma had been prone to those kinds of angry outbursts.

"She died in there?"

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"No." He kept his gaze on Vi as he spoke. She felt uncomfortable, as if he were weighing her reactions. "She died in the theater. She'd been hanged."

Vi swallowed. The studio's theater was as familiar to her as the back of her hand. The stage was a traditional proscenium arch because Arista believed that dance should have room to breathe. She had hated theater in the round, performance in the center of a crowd of people. Arista preferred the illusion that dance could give against a formal backdrop. Her work always tended toward classical, even as it was dubbed modern.

Sometimes Vi thought the company had crushed Paloma long before Arista died.

Above stage were a series of catwalks so that the technicians could reach the lights. The catwalks were built strong—Arista had been in a theater where the catwalks had collapsed under the weight of a worker, killing him and maiming a dancer who had been onstage at the time.

"Where?" Vi asked. In addition to the catwalks, there were the poles that held the lights, and then the beams that ran along the ceiling above the seats. Or someone could have taken her up to the booth in the back and hung her out the window. The windows opened back there, another trick of Arista's.

"We're not sure," he said. "Whoever killed her watched her die, then cut her down and posed her."

Vi shuddered. She didn't want to think about how long it took Paloma to die by hanging—or what it was like to watch that. Someone had to really hate her to do that.

He placed two fingers on the envelope and slid it across the table. Then he opened the flap and pulled out large glossy photographs, keeping the backs to Vi.

"We think the parent of a student did this or had it done," he said, stacking the photographs. "You've been following the case, right?"

"No," she said. Apparently she had let go of the studio more than she had thought. Or maybe she was just hiding from it.

"Mmm." He was still clutching the photos. "Last fall, Ms. Kitani turned down a female student, saying she needed to lose thirty-five pounds before joining the dance troupe. The parents were suing, saying that their daughter's weight was within the normal range, and that Ms. Kitani's requirement would cause undue harm."

"But they wanted the daughter in Paloma's school."

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He nodded. "Claiming it was the only way she could learn modern dance in Portland."

Vi's leg cramped. She stood and stretched until the cramp lessened.

Tate watched. "What happened to your leg?"

"What happens to many athletes," she said. "I blew my knee at a performance, and it hasn't been the same since. It ended my career as a dancer."

"But you can still dance."

"Not well," she said, sitting down. "How can the parents sue? Portland doesn't have the discrimination law that San Francisco has."

She was referring to the case in San Francisco in which a girl had been turned down for an exclusive ballet company because she had the wrong body type. San Francisco had a city ordinance which prohibited discrimination based on appearance.

"It's a civil case," he said. "They can do anything. They said it destroyed their daughter's belief in herself."

Vi was silent. Much as she hated people trying to force themselves into endeavors for which they were not qualified, she empathized with the girl. Paloma wasn't known for her tact. She might have done something, said something, that had indeed been destructive to the girl's self-esteem.

Vi had solid self-esteem and she'd suffered under Paloma's verbal attacks.

"Why would the parents kill her if they're suing her?" Vi asked.

He shrugged. "I've never found murder to be particularly rational."

Then he gave her the pile.

There must have been twenty photographs in the stack. They were done in color. Her face was black with blood, the rope still around her neck.

Vi let the photographs drop, her stomach turning. To her own surprise, she blinked back tears.

She had no idea how someone could do such a thing. Especially how someone could watch a person strangle to death, the face changing color, the tongue extending, the eyes growing too large for their sockets. She couldn't imagine what the noise was like, or how it felt to be so close to someone struggling for their very existence.

"What do you think?" he asked after a moment.

She shook her head. She hadn't even noticed the position of the body. Just the face—the once-beautiful face—ruined forever by a hideous and prolonged death.

With a hand that was steadier than it should have been, she picked the photographs up again and forced herself to look at them.

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Paloma sat in a lotus position, the bottoms of her feet together, her hands in front of her, palms together. Someone had tied the hands into that position, the arms bent at the elbow. Paloma's back was straight, her body shoved against an overturned chair to achieve the right effect.

Vi had never felt her body turn cold before, not like this. It was as if her blood had been replaced with ice.

"It wasn't a student," she said.

Tate looked at her.

"It was one of us."

The music, by a Chinese composer, had come first, lyrical and fragile. It had sounded to Vi like someone had finally managed to capture the wind.

Arista had loved it, had thought it different enough to capture a story she'd been trying to tell her entire life, the story of a goddess who had overreached herself. A more powerful god, threatened by the goddess, was trying to destroy her.

Arista had been working the choreography in the months before her death. She kept coming back to the image of a woman sitting in a lotus position, like many of the Chinese drawings that graced her office. Arista wanted the woman to be motionless and yet to rise on a cloud of smoke toward the sky.

She couldn't figure out how to achieve that vision. She knew she could cheat and use effects, the way someone on a play would, but she didn't want to. She wanted to use dance, somehow.

First, she started with dancers lifting the motionless woman toward the sky, but that was too clunky. So she placed the woman on a gauze sheet and tried lifting that. But the sheet wouldn't hold the woman's weight.

She was thinking of using scarves to hide the dancers when she got ill. Her body, too thin and tortured by years of physical abuse, did not have the stamina to survive the illness. After a few weeks, Arista died.

In her last days, she'd still been trying to figure out how to put the image onstage.

Only the creative team had worked on the new piece with Arista. Not even Paloma had known about it. Arista hadn't liked too many hands in her work. A few of the dancers had tried the routine, but they hadn't known its meaning.

The dancer, the serene dancer, was supposed to represent a sacrifice to the hostile god as an attempt to save the goddess.

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A person would have had to know the meaning to bend Paloma into that position. Because only a member of the creative team understood what that was saying. Paloma had to be sacrificed to save Arista. Arista, who had already gone to another plane. Arista, who had become the goddess who was being destroyed.

It didn't take the police long to figure out which of the three had committed the crime. Only one had been in Portland that day. She hadn't even tried to cover her trail.

Susanna Weeks had been the youngest member of the creative team. She had idolized Arista and had even tried to finish the piece in the weeks after Arista's death. When Paloma had disbanded the company, Susanna had gone to the others, demanding that they take Paloma to court.

It had been Vi who had talked her out of it. Vi, who believed that the best thing they could all do was move on.

That was before Paloma systematically destroyed Vi's career.

Susanna had survived, though. She could still dance. One of the best modern dance companies in San Francisco picked her up. She danced for them as a principal, learning the new techniques, but not really adopting them. Her greatest desire was to finish Arista's last piece, and Paloma wouldn't let her do it.

No one knew exactly what set Susanna off. Tate had a theory. The story of the lawsuit against Kitani Dance Studios hit the San Francisco papers the Sunday before the murder. The article had focused on the young dancer, and her reaction to Paloma.

She ruined my life, the girl said.

She ruined a lot of lives, Vi knew, and it didn't look like the damage was done.

Susanna pleaded guilty to second-degree murder, with a chance for parole in twenty-five years. The authorities had everything—from a plane ticket to Portland that morning to fingerprints on the statue she'd used to knock Paloma senseless.

At first, the defense wanted to take the case to trial, believing Susanna too small to lift Paloma and hang her from the catwalk. But Tate, after having seen Vi, knew that dancers were strong. He found video of Susanna lifting dancers twice her size, and that helped the prosecution's case.

Vi went to the allocution, listened to Susanna recount the crime. Susanna looked frail, so beautiful in her tailored suit, certainly not strong enough—not crazy enough—to hang a woman and watch her die.

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Tate sat one row back, hands folded in front of him as if he were clasping them together to prevent himself from strangling her.

Susanna's voice was flat as she recounted all her grievances against Paloma, how much she had hated her, what Paloma had done to Arista's memory. It wasn't the newspaper article that set Susanna off. It was one final phone call in which Paloma told her that she was going to finish the dance herself—a dance she had never seen performed, a concept she'd never really understood, and a production she couldn't begin to undertake.

From that moment on, Susanna stewed, until she finally couldn't take it any more. Then she'd flown to Portland and ended everything.

Vi's hands were in the pockets of her suit, pulling it down. Her entire body was tense. She'd never heard anyone recount a crime before, and she hadn't expected to hear such an emotionless tone. Wasn't murder a crime of passion? And if it wasn't, shouldn't it be?

When Susanna was done, and the judge had gaveled her sentence down, the guards handcuffed her to take her away to a place where there was no dance. As she turned around, she saw Vi and her face lit up.

"I saved it, Vi," she said. "I saved it."

Vi's mouth fell open. She didn't respond. She couldn't—not before they led Susanna away.

People were moving all around Vi, conversation building. But Vi couldn't bring herself to stand. She could barely breathe.

Someone sat down beside her, and a warm hand covered hers. She looked up and saw Tate studying her.

"You didn't tell her," he said.

"She'll find out soon enough," Vi said. And think it Vi's failure that the company wouldn't reopen. Think that it was Vi who was now betraying Arista's memory, when Vi had nothing to do with it.

"I'll make sure someone tells her that Kitani died without a will," he said.

"I'm not sure you want to do that," Vi said.

He frowned. "Why not?"

"It might upset her more."

"Why?"

"The copyrights," Vi said. "They're part of the estate. Paloma had no family. God knows what'll happen to them."

"Won't they be put up for sale?" Tate asked.

"Maybe," Vi said. "Or maybe they'll just be forgotten—or bought by someone who can afford them, someone who understands them less than I understand Jerome Robbins."

"You understand him well enough to teach him."

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"To beginners," she said, and stood. Her knee threatened to buckle beneath her, as it often did when she'd been sitting too long.

"I'll buy you coffee," Tate said.

Vi shook her head. She wanted to be done with all of this, to forget it had ever happened. She wanted to bury the emotions that had been overwhelming her the last few weeks, the anger—not at Paloma, but at Susanna.

If only Susanna had done this before the will was settled, before the transfer of assets had been made. If only she had done it right after Arista died, then the Littlefield Dance Company would still exist. Vi would still be creative director, and Arista's work—a lifetime of work—wouldn't have been destroyed.

But the gods were cruel, especially the gods of dance. And they were unforgiving. Arista had known that. In her sketch of the piece, the sacrifice had been rejected.

The goddess had been destroyed.

"You sure?" Tate asked.

It took Vi a moment to understand what he meant. "Yeah," she said. "I have a long drive, and then rehearsal tonight."

"Have they learned how to dance yet?" he asked.

She gave him a small smile. "They're not falling down any more."

"That's a start," he said.

"In this case," she said, "that's all I can ask for."

"It's all we can ever ask for," he said.

She almost argued with him. And then she remembered. Dance was impossible. Only a few managed to conquer it, and never for life. Only for a moment.

And it was those moments that had to last a lifetime. That was what Susanna had ignored, what Paloma had never learned, and what Vi would never, ever forget.

CONVERSATION WITH

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

Kristine Kathryn Rusch's name is well known to AHMM readers, but she also publishes a series of novels as Kris Nelscott. Beginning with the Edgar-nominated A Dangerous Road *in 2000, these books explore the Civil Rights Era through the eyes of Smokey Dalton, a Memphis- and Chicago-based African-American private investigator. St. Martin's will publish her fourth book in the series,* Stone Cribs, *in September.*

Ms. Rusch is a prolific writer in the field of mystery, romance, science fiction, and fantasy. She is also the former editor of The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.

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AHMM: How did you come to create the character of Smokey Dalton, and why did you choose this era?

KKR: In 1995, I was reading a copy of America's Best Essays, and I came across a passing reference to the fact that Martin Luther King, Jr. had been at Atlanta's "Gone with the Wind" premiere celebration as part of a church choir, and here's the shocking part—he had been dressed as a slave child. The greatest civil rights leader of our generation—of any generation, really—had suffered the indignity of performing music for members of the Old South (there were former confederate soldiers at this thing), dressed like a slave.

My brain popped up with, "If there was one ten-year-old child there, other ten year olds were there as well. Imagine how they felt." Instantly, I had Smokey Dalton.

I knew I had to write about the Old South meeting the New South. Two such moments were the "Gone With the Wind" premiere because it was so very symbolic, and the assassination of Dr. King.

So Smokey had to be in both places, and he had to feel the significance. I also knew that the book had to be a mystery, but it couldn't be about solving the assassination. From there, I had a book.

AHMM: What are some of the challenges of writing from Smokey's perspective?

KKR: The biggest challenge for me is getting everything right. I was trained as a historian. I worked as a journalist for many years. Both skills come into play in these novels. I research like a historian—often using primary sources like newspapers—but I explore like a journalist. In other words, I go to the areas where the stories take place, and try to see them with someone else's eye.

Unfortunately for me, I can't finish a page if I don't have a particular detail. So I do five times the research I need for the books, and rarely use most of it.

Smokey's perspective is easy for me. He's a living breathing person in my mind, and has his opinions and the ways he looks at the world, which are sometimes different from mine. The difficulties for me come in translating the world(s) of 1968–1969 to a modern audience. You'd think that 34 years isn't a long time, but in this context it is.

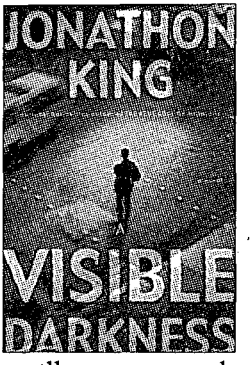
For example, as I was researching the next Smokey novel, *Stone Cribs*, I came across a picture book called *What to Expect When You Go to the Hospital*, published in 1968. The picture that caught my attention was of a nurse standing beside an elevator—in front of her, bolted to the wall at waist height, was a steel ashtray. I had forgotten that you could smoke anywhere in a hospital, except in the areas where patients were on oxygen. Explaining changes in attitudes, large and small, without resorting to long lumps of exposition, can sometimes be quite difficult.

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ROBERT C. HAHN

Southern mysteries come in amazing numbers and an even more amazing variety. These four recently published books hardly scratch the surface but they do serve to illustrate the riches that await readers.



Perhaps no Southern locale has produced a better crop of current mystery writers than Florida, and many of them boast journalistic backgrounds—Edna Buchannan, Carl Hiaasen, and Tom Corcoran for example. Add to that list Jonathon King whose debut novel *The Blue Edge of Midnight* was a bestseller and whose second novel, **Visible Darkness** (Dutton, $23.95), proves the first was no fluke. King's journalism career includes stints with the *Philadelphia Daily News* and South Florida's *Sun-Sentinel*, and he has carved out a niche that will resonate with fans of other Florida writers such as James W. Hall and Randy Wayne White as well as that quintessential Florida writer, John D. MacDonald.

Max Freeman is an ex-cop, a transplanted Philadelphian, living in an inaccessible one-room fishing shack converted into a home deep in the Everglades. Freeman's few ties to civilization include a close friendship with attorney Billy Manchester, another Philadelphian. The backstory of their friendship, predicated on the unusual bond formed by their mothers, one black, one white, in Philadelphia, is just one of the nice touches King uses to humanize his hero. When Manchester calls with a request for help, Freeman's response is immediate and unqualified. Soon Freeman is investigating the tenuous link between the deaths of a number of elderly black widows near Ft. Lauderdale—women whose deaths appeared to be from natural causes but all of whose insurance policies had been quietly purchased beforehand.

The urban landscape Freeman must navigate is all too familiar—north or south—poverty, gangs, drugs, fear, and inadequate police resources, grim conditions leavened by examples of bravery, quiet dignity, and caring. Yet there are vultures preying on the most vulnerable and an almost invisible serial killer whose camouflage Freeman must penetrate before more die.

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King imbues his story with depth by fleshing out Freeman's past with flashbacks to his youth, his traumatic experiences as a police officer, and his mother's lingering death. King's characters, from the bigoted insurance investigator Frank McCane to the scary killer snuffing out lives, are convincing. Even though the reader is aware from the very first chapter of who the killer is, the shadow behind the killer remains ominous and unknown as Freeman continues his pursuit. King has a winning formula pairing sleuth Max Freeman, a rugged loner, with the rich and powerful Billy Manchester, who can provide ingress to cases, financial backing, and other resources. But King's skillful storytelling, crackling dialogue, crisp pacing, and clever plotting will secure his series a prime spot in the ranks of Florida mystery writers.

Bayou Moon (St. Martin's, $23.95) by C. L. Bevill is a debut novel that perhaps comes closest to the traditional Southern mystery with its backdrop of the Plantation South of wealth, caste, and prejudice still affecting its modern day inhabitants.

A beautiful, successful artist, New Yorker Mignon Thibeaux—better known simply as Mignon—returns to La Valle, Louisiana, to find out what happened to her mother and to seek revenge. Mignon, born in poverty, was very young when her beautiful mother, Garlande, and her lover, Luc St. Michel, the married scion of the grand family of St. Germaine Parish, supposedly ran off together. Mignon and her father were chased off immediately afterward and her father died soon after, leaving her a virtual orphan. Now Mignon has returned to find out what really happened to her mother and who was responsible for destroying her family. Mignon is swept into a story of murder, betrayal, and treachery, but she has her own considerable forces (wealth, beauty, bravery) as well as allies both known and unexpected as she confronts the powerful St. Michel clan and reclaims her heritage.

Bevill effectively uses many of the conventional trappings of both Southern romance and mystery from the rustic and abandoned childhood home Mignon seeks to reclaim to the small-town sheriff who seems too handsome to be believed or trusted.

The humorous branch of the Southern mystery tree is alive and well from the scathing wit of Carl Hiaasen's novels to the broad folksy guffaws of Joan Hess's Ozark mysteries featuring Arly Hanks. And now Donna Andrews uses a high-tech setting in rural Caerphilly, Virginia, to create her unique brand of riotous detection where mayhem is normal and murder merely a prelude to hysterical adventure in her latest, **Crouching Buzzard, Leaping Loon** (St. Martin's, $23.95). Meg Langslow takes on the dual role of temporary switchboard operator and amateur sleuth at her brother's computer software company, Mutant Wizards, *continued on page 141*

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LADY APPLETON AND THE CRIPPLEGATE CHRISOMS

KATHY LYNN EMERSON

"Goodwife Billings is proved a widow," Nick Baldwin announced.

Susanna, Lady Appleton, looked up from the herbal she'd been reading, a smile of welcome and congratulation lighting up the pale oval of her face. "Excellent. I was certain you would be able to find the correct parish with no trouble."

He sent a rueful grin in her direction and advanced a few more steps into the room, a private parlor on an upper floor of a fair, large house near London's Moorgate. It was furnished with considerable luxury—glass in all the windows, floors of Purbeck marble and glazed tile, and thick arras-work hangings. "Aye. On the fifth try."

Light laughter eddied toward him as she rose from a high-backed elmwood chair inlaid with oak. "It might have been worse. There must be a hundred parishes in London." She went to the hearth, where a small pot sat keeping warm on a trivet near the flames, and ladled mulled wine into two goblets. She held one out to him.

"Gramercy," Nick murmured, closing the remaining distance between them. He took deep pleasure in his first sip of the hot, spiced liquid. After a long, cold day spent looking through parish records, both the drink and the heat from the crackling fire sent welcome warmth to his chilled bones.

"You found evidence, then, of the death of Mary Billings's runaway husband?"

Mary, the housekeeper at Nick's Northamptonshire manor, had

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Linda Weatherly

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been abandoned by her feckless spouse several years earlier. She'd heard rumors of his demise soon after, but she'd had no reason then to go to the trouble and expense of confirming them. Only when she'd expressed her wish to remarry and the vicar had refused to perform the rite until she could prove the new marriage would not be bigamous, had the question of when and where Billings died become important. Nick had offered to look into the matter. He'd been glad of the excuse to visit London while Susanna was in residence.

"Billings was buried on the sixth day of November in 1569, more than two years ago, in the parish of St. Giles without Cripplegate. The clerk there has made a fair and notarized copy of the entry in the parish records."

"All's well, then?" Susanna's sharp-sighted blue eyes fixed on his face, studying him with as much intensity as she'd been perusing the herbal when he arrived. She did not wait for him to answer. "There is something troubles you."

It did not surprise Nick overmuch that she could read his mood with such ease. They had known each other more than a dozen years and shared many adventures. If he'd had his way, she'd have long since become his wife, but Susanna refused to remarry and he had learned to content himself with what she would share—her affection, her friendship, her concern, and most of all, her clever, agile mind.

"Well?" Susanna prompted him.

Nick took another strengthening, warming, soothing sip of the mulled wine. "What Mary Billings knew of her husband's life led me to suspect he'd been buried in Cripplegate Ward, for we believed he'd died shortly after having been released from the Compter in Wood Street."

She nodded and drank from her own cup. The Compter, a prison, was used to hold those taken for offenses against city laws.

"Cripplegate contains five parishes. I started with the southernmost church, St. Mary Magdalen in Milk Street. I went on to St. Michael, and there came upon an entry in the register of burials that puzzled me. The cause of death was writ down 'overlaid.' Do you know what is meant by the term?"

Frowning, she set down her goblet. "I fear I do. It means to be suffocated, but in a very particular manner. You know that infants are wrapped in swaddling clothes, bound tightly in order to ensure that the limbs will grow straight?"

"Aye. I've always felt sorry for the child, unable to move."

"More helpless than you know. In theory a baby is unwrapped

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and washed two or three times a day, but far too many new mothers do not seem to know how to care for their offspring. Or else they do not wish to be bothered."

Nick considered that. Wealthy households employed nurses but poor women too busy to pay attention to their babies simply neglected them. "I fear you have the right of it. I have seen children hooked by the swaddling to a convenient wall or left in the cradle to cry all day."

"Either place is safer than being carelessly placed in the family bed to share sleeping space with several older, larger bodies. An infant 'overlaid' has been smothered because a bedmate rolled over on top of him."

"Not uncommon, then?"

"No, more's the pity. A goodly number of infants die in their cradles, for no apparent reason, but for those who sleep with others, when a cause is sought, it's most often found that the mother or the nurse slept unnatural heavy due to drink or illness." She sighed. "Although I've never had any children myself, it is my belief such deaths could be avoided with a small amount of care."

Nick drained his goblet and abandoned it on a round table made of walnut. "How easily could such deaths be arranged?"

Eyes narrowing at his words, Susanna caught her breath. "What have you discovered?"

"Mayhap naught but an odd coincidence."

"And mayhap more. Tell me."

"It was at St. Michael that I first saw the word 'overlaid,' and although I was curious as to what it might mean, I took little notice of it then."

Restless, Nick crossed the chamber to stand at a window, looking out over the garden toward the wall that shielded this property from the sprawling city beyond. He knew Susanna well enough to predict how she'd react when he told her all he'd found. He had debated with himself all the way here. Even if what he suspected was true, naught would be done about it under the law. Only once had he heard of a charge of murder being brought against someone for the death of an infant, and that had been the case of a mother who'd stuffed her newly delivered baby into a privy and left it to perish. And yet, this was just the sort of wrong that Susanna relished righting. Besides, it went against all Nick himself believed in to do nothing, especially if by inaction he allowed more deaths to occur.

"I'd not have noticed the entry at all had it not been within the time period I'd resolved to search: 12 December, 1570. But there

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was another oddity about the entry, too. Unlike most, only the name of the mother was given."

Susanna sank down atop the domed lid of a trussing-coffer, a chest designed for use while traveling and suitable for storing anything from clothing to muniments to books to grain and bread. "So, the dead child was a bastard."

"Aye."

Most records of burials in parish registers identified the deceased by his profession, or sometimes simply as householder. Dead women and children were almost always listed in terms of their relationship to a man. "John, infant son of John Smith, householder" or "stillborn son of John Smith, carpenter" would not have caught Nick's eye, but "John, base-got son of Jane Johnson" had been another matter.

"I went on to St. Alban," Nick continued, "then St. Mary Aldermanbury, and finally to St. Giles Cripplegate, which lies outside the city walls, half of the parish in the county of Middlesex. At two of the three I came upon similar entries. Three children in adjoining parishes, all dead by cause of being overlaid, all base-got upon the body of one Jane Johnson. I had not thought to do so in the other parishes, but at St. Giles I also inspected the records of baptisms. That child died during the first month of life."

"A chrisom," Susanna murmured, sorrow and pity coloring her tone of voice. The name given to such short-lived infants derived from the fact that the same white chrisom cloth laid over the baby at baptism was customarily used as a winding sheet when only a few weeks separated christening and burial.

"Do you think it possible the mother deliberately killed all three children?"

"Possible? Oh, yes." She'd gone pale, but her chin jutted out at a determined angle and her eyes blazed. "And who knows how many more we will find if we delve deeper?"

He nodded. Her thoughts followed his. "I mean to discover if there are, and find out what happened to Jane Johnson. She may be dead."

"And she may be about to give birth to another child, to kill another infant." Spurred into action, Susanna hopped down from the chest and made her way to a writing table. "Tell me again of the parishes where you found records and the dates given. Then we must determine what other parishes border those in order to widen the search."

"There are, I believe, one hundred six churches in London, in some ninety parishes. Then there are the out-parishes."

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"I do not care if there are a thousand! If what we suspect is true, it cannot be permitted to continue and it cannot go unpunished. We must find Jane Johnson and if she is again with child we must keep watch on her to prevent her from taking another life."

Three days later, Susanna Appleton's search brought her to the small church of St. Olave. Located in Silver Street, just where it turned to become the north end of Noble, St. Olave's was an unremarkable edifice, but the parish was adjacent to Cripplegate ward and worth the time to search. The clerk, who was the second most important figure in any parish and responsible for keeping the records, was even less impressive. A small, wiry fellow named Lawrence Whitney, he scowled over Nick's request that he remove the parish record book from its locked coffer to allow them to look at it.

"The register is taken out only on Sundays, when the week's new records are added."

"Must I roust a churchwarden, then?" Nick inquired. "I am certain one of them has the second key." This was regulated by law and had been since the time of old King Henry.

They were by now most familiar with the way the system worked. After three days of looking through records and asking for Jane Johnson by name, however, they were no closer to finding more information than they had been at the first.

Susanna hid a smile as Whitney buckled under Nick's steady regard, but the clerk hovered as they went through the entries, as if he feared they would criticize his diligence. Or mayhap his penmanship, for he had a near illegible hand.

"There," Susanna said, pointing to an entry on the page of burials for 1568. Elizabeth, daughter of Jane Johnson, "base-got," had been buried on the last day of March. No cause of death was given. Susanna turned to the clerk. "What do you know of this woman?" She tapped the page.

Whitney sidled closer and looked at the name above Susanna's gloved finger. "Jane Johnson? A vagabond."

"She does not live in the parish, then?"

"We do not want such here. She'd have been escorted to the parish boundary and sent on her way." Contempt laced his voice. Bastards were a charge on the parish, all expense and little reward. Those who bore them were held in low regard, unless they would name the father and he could be forced to support the child.

"And the child—how did she die?"

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Whitney looked at her askance. "It was close to four years ago, madam. How am I to remember?"

Susanna examined the record of baptisms and found Elizabeth Johnson. She'd been buried three weeks after she'd been christened. Another chrisom.

Further questioning of the clerk yielded nothing more of use and, thanking him, Susanna and Nick continued on to St. Mary Staining and St. John Zachary. They found no mention of Jane Johnson or her base-got offspring in either parish.

"Four children in four years." Nick shook his head. "Is that not enough?"

"But look at the dates," Susanna said, and produced the list she'd made.

St. Mary Aldermanbury–11 April, 1567
St. Olave–31 March, 1568
St. Giles without Cripplegate–5 November, 1569
St. Michael–12 December, 1570

Nick frowned down at the page. "You think there is a fifth, more recent than the others?"

"Or Jane is even now with child." Susanna pondered what to do. She had already put out word among those few midwives she knew in the city, asking them to notify her if they encountered a woman named Jane Johnson, but it was a common name, the city was large, and midwives were numerous. Susanna was known to some for the herbals she had written, but many others, who could neither read nor write, had no cause to do favors for a visiting country gentlewoman.

In the end, she could only think to revisit the parish where the most recent death had occurred. At St. Michael, the clerk could help them not at all, but he did give them the names of the parish searchers, two old women whose duty it was to repair to the place where a death had occurred and view the corpse, making enquiries and examining the deceased until they could determine what disease or casualty had caused the death. It was their report to the parish clerk that had resulted in "overlaid" being writ down in the register.

The searchers for St. Michael's were two elderly matrons, sisters who lived together in the garret of a sprawling tenement at the edge of the parish. Goodwife Mellon used a stick to help her walk, a slow, ponderous progress. Goodwife Frowley, all skin and bones, flitted birdlike throughout the interview, landing in one spot for a moment,

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then moving on, head bobbing as she spoke, not in a nod but as if she needed to move it about in order to see everything at once.

"The death of a bastard is a blessing," she informed them when they'd explained their interest in Jane Johnson.

"Nay, sister," Goodwife Melon objected. "Say not so."

"What? Preserve the child as a charge on the parish?"

"No. No. But it is not such a great sin to procure an abortment. Better the mother prevent the birth of the child altogether."

"Better she do so by not lying with the father," her sister snapped.

Susanna listened to the debate with mixed emotions. She could not help but feel sympathy for a young woman who found herself pregnant and unwed. A clever lass would leave home and go to a parish where she was not known. There she might claim to be a widow. But most girls tried to conceal their plight by a judicious arrangement of aprons and skirts, only to be ejected from their place of employment when they were found out. Pregnant women were an all-too-common sight on the outskirts of villages and towns, where some gave birth alone in a field or hedge, if they could not drag themselves to a church porch. Most, however, were not abandoned when they were "in the straw." Susanna had heard that even vagrant women banded together to help a birth proceed.

"Did she kill her own child?" Nick asked when the searchers gave him an opening.

"It was an accident," Goodwife Melon said.

"She was in a rare state by the time we got there," said her sister. "I am certain she did not mean the baby to die."

Susanna wondered whether she could trust what either searcher said. Neither dared admit she might have been wrong in declaring the cause of death, even though they disagreed about everything else.

"The woman was simple," Goodwife Frowley murmured thoughtfully. "That's the only reason I recall her at all."

"Nonsense, sister. She was a clever baggage. She did but pretend to be foolish so we'd ask no more questions."

They glared at each other, but neither had more to add.

"Who is the local midwife?" Susanna asked. If she'd delivered the baby, she might remember Jane Johnson and confirm whether she was simpleminded or not. The possibility that she was added a new dimension to the situation. Not child murder but ignorance? Either way, if Jane was with child again, that child was in danger.

The midwife lived nearby, two doors down from the apothecary's sign—a pill resting on a lolling pink tongue—but she was not at home.

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"We will return tomorrow," Susanna decided.

"This is women's business," Nick remarked as they made their way back toward the house where Susanna was staying with friends.

She fought a smile. He was brave enough to slay dragons for her, but the possibility of encountering a woman in labor was enough to send him running for the hills. "I will talk to her alone if you wish."

He could not hide his relief.

The next morning, Susanna returned. The midwife was a plump, comfortable sort named Agnes Dane, and she remembered Jane Johnson.

"She has the mind of a child herself," Agnes confirmed. "No sense about men, either."

"Is she a whore?" Most brothelkeepers took care that their women did not bear children.

"Not to judge by the rooms she had." Agnes described the chamber where the child had been born and had died. "Long since vacated," she added. "A poet lives there now."

"Jane bore other children before the one you delivered. All of them were suffocated in their beds."

For a moment, Susanna thought the midwife unmoved, but then she stirred herself. "I have seen this Jane Johnson since then."

"Is she breeding again?"

"May be."

"How far along?" Susanna had no doubt of the midwife's eye.

"The child is due any time now, if I am any judge."

"Did she name the father of the child you delivered?"

"Nay. Resisted all our efforts, she did." Agnes made a dismissive gesture. "Likely she did not know."

"Or she is not as simple as she seemed."

Susanna left the midwife's lodgings more determined than ever to find Jane. It was too late to help the others, but she still had a chance to save this new child.

Just as the church bells tolled nine at night, signaling that lights and fires should be put out, one of the midwives who'd heard of Susanna's interest in Jane Johnson sent word that a woman by that name was in labor in the parish of Allhallows, Honey Lane. With Nick's help Susanna found the house in a narrow, dark street.

Jane's screams reached them even before they entered. She lay on a thin pallet, her face contorted with the intensity of her labor. When the pain passed, her features resolved themselves into the vacant stare of one who had given up on life.

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Simple? Mayhap she was, Susanna thought, but that did not mean she lacked the power to communicate. "Has she named the child's father?" she asked the midwife.

"Not yet." Her attention fixed on her patient, she paid no mind to Susanna, but when Nick made to enter the birthing chamber she gave him a look over her shoulder that could have turned the sun to ice.

"I will wait below," he muttered, and vanished into the gloom outside. There was an alehouse two buildings along, Susanna recalled, and suspected she'd find him there if she had need of him.

At hand was women's work.

Three tortuous hours passed. The midwife, relentless in her effort to discover who had fathered Joan's latest bastard, denied the straining woman a mother's caudle, the special drink made of spiced wine or ale and given to keep up her strength and spirits. She wanted Jane weak enough to betray her lover, but weakness was not what Susanna saw.

Jane's flailing hand caught the midwife's arm. The midwife yelped in pain and it took Susanna's help to break the hold. Jane had gripped with such force that she'd left red finger marks on the midwife's skin.

"I've known women in the straw to squeeze hard," the midwife muttered, "but this one's got hands as strong as a man's." Her face set with grim determination, she resumed her efforts to goad Jane into telling the truth about her child's father, but she kept her distance from those powerful fingers.

Another half hour passed.

"What if she does not know his name?" No matter what Jane might have done, Susanna pitied her for the suffering she endured in order to give birth. There were herbs that could take away much of the pain and others to ease delivery, but Susanna did not carry such with her and the midwife, if she had them, held them back.

"She knows who he is, I warrant. Just because she is simple does not mean she lacks all sense." The midwife's face was set in a grim expression.

"What if he did not tell her his name?"

"Her lover will have given her some name to call him by, never doubt it."

Susanna had been watching the woman in the bed. Her eyes, open and glazed with pain, widened at the midwife's words. Fear? But of what was she afraid? Penance for bearing a bastard? She would have endured that already, for each of the previous children.

"It may not be mere stubbornness keeps her quiet," Susanna

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murmured. It was possible Jane was so stalwart in protecting her lover because she lived in terror of what he would do to her if she betrayed him.

Was he an important man in London? Someone who could order her disposed of if she spoke? Or was he simply a bully who'd threatened her often enough that she dared not risk his wrath? Either way, Susanna thought, Jane would not tell them. If she had kept her secret throughout the torture of those previous births, she'd maintain her silence now.

The pains continued for another hour before Jane at last produced a healthy girl child. The midwife tied and cut the umbilical cord, washed the babe, and swaddled her in new linen bands until she was trussed from head to foot. These tasks complete, she handed the newborn child to her mother. Jane smiled at the downy head and cooed and petted the baby.

Concerned for the tiny girl's safety, Susanna moved closer to the pallet. "May I hold her?" she asked, tucking her hands under the small, squirming body.

But Jane would not let go. With frightening ease, she resisted Susanna's attempt to ease the child away from her. Surprised, Susanna's gaze flew to Jane's face, wondering if she knew her own strength. Mayhap she had been wrong. How could such a powerful woman be cowed by a lover?

Another explanation for the deaths occurred to Susanna then. Jane might have killed her own children by accident. Had she hugged them each with such an excess of affection that they'd suffocated?

Vowing to keep a watchful eye on mother and child, Susanna abandoned her attempt to remove the baby from Jane's arms. She'd just turned back to the midwife, meaning to offer to pay her to stay with Jane until other arrangements could be made, when the local vicar arrived.

"Did she give up the father's name during childbirth?" he asked the midwife.

"No. Silent as a monk, that one."

"You were charged with obtaining that information."

"Was I to torture her?" the midwife inquired. "If she did not speak when her time was upon her, she will not."

The vicar's disdain for both Jane and the midwife hardened Susanna's heart against him. He fell lower still in her estimation when he began to rant about the charge this child would be on the parish. "Even if it dies," he grumbled, "it will cost 2s.9d. to bury."

"Enough, sir," Susanna protested. "I will support the child myself if money is all that concerns you."

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The vicar, mollified, became effusive in his thanks. Then, duty done, he was about to take his leave when a cry from the baby drew his attention to Jane and he looked well at her for the first time.

"I have seen this woman before," he gasped, "and in similar circumstances! Whore! How many bastards have you brought into the world?"

Susanna prevented him from launching another diatribe by putting her hand on his sleeve. "There is more to this than you know, vicar. Where did you see her before?"

Her serious mien and somber tone had as much effect as Susanna's obvious wealth and gentility. He swallowed his outrage and replied in measured tones. "I was previously the curate at St. Mary Aldermanbury."

Where the first baby died. "Will you tell me what you recall of that birth?"

The vicar frowned. "It was my clerk," he said after a moment's thought. "Whitney showed a most unwarranted sympathy for this woman."

"Lawrence Whitney?"

"Aye. These days he is the clerk at St. Olave, Silver Street."

Susanna found Lawrence Whitney alone, and for a moment her steps faltered on the stone-flagged floor of the chancel. She'd had the remainder of the night to consider what she should say to him, but now that the moment was upon her, she had second thoughts. True, it was strange that Whitney should remember Jane was a vagabond, but not that she was simple. And his interest in her almost five years ago seemed suspicious, but the explanation that had made sense to her in the wee hours of the morning might be dead wrong.

He turned and, recognizing her, scowled.

"Good day to you, Clerk Whitney," she said, and decided to plunge ahead. If she wronged him, she would apologize. "I am come to tell you that you have a new daughter."

Face blank with astonishment, he gawked at her. Then he dropped the communion plate he'd been polishing and his expression changed to one of panic.

"Do not trouble to deny it," she told him with a grim sense of satisfaction. She had been right. He was Jane's lover. "This time Jane Johnson named her child's father."

"She has not the wit to know whether she's had one man or twenty."

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"If that is true, sirrah, the more foul your actions in taking advantage of her. But tell me, if all her children were not yours, why go to such pains to hide their mother?"

He started to speak, then appeared to change his mind. Sullen-faced, he settled for glaring at her. Only when the silence between them stretched to unbearable lengths did he blurt out another accusation. "She's naught but a foolish woman. Much to be pitied."

"Foolish? Is that an excuse to have overlaid four young children?"

"What do I care for them? It was better so. She has not the wit to care for them. They'd have become a charge on the parish."

"Not if you married their mother."

"Impossible."

Susanna despised weaklings. The fellow seemed incapable of giving up his mistress, yet he was unwilling to take any responsibility for the children she bore him. He'd rather move her around in the same general area of London, each time into a different parish, so that no one would notice she kept having bastard children and they kept dying.

"You can be required to marry her," Susanna reminded him. "Or do you prefer to sit in the stocks with a notice around your neck saying: 'Lawrence Whitney hath got Jane Johnson with child,' and then parade through this church on three consecutive Sundays wearing a penitent's white sheet and a placard saying: 'Fornicator'?"

"I am already wed." He spat out the admission.

"In that case, the placard will say 'Adulterer,' but having a wife will not spare you the obligation of supporting your child until she reaches her seventh year."

"Think you she will live that long? Such children do not thrive. Not with such a mother."

"All the more reason that you must take steps to protect the babe."

He heaved a deep sigh. "You meddle in matters that are none of your business, Lady Appleton. What will be, will be. It is in God's hands." The pious glance he cast upward was so patently false Susanna was surprised lightning did not streak out of the sky and strike him dead on the spot.

"The laws of God and man alike condemn you, sirrah. And I mean to do more than meddle."

"Report me to the church? Why trouble yourself?"

There was no remorse in him, for he knew as well as she did that no dire punishment awaited him for seducing a simpleminded young woman and repeatedly getting her with child. He'd avoided

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embarrassment with his machinations, nothing more. Even now, Jane would bear the brunt of the church's censure, not Whitney. He'd do penance and be forgiven.

In frustration, Susanna turned on her heel and stormed out of the church. She had friends. Mayhap one of them had enough influence to force Whitney to support his own child.

This child *would* thrive. Susanna intended to make certain of it. And Jane herself would be removed from her lover's influence. She would make a new beginning.

Susanna's first thought was to fetch Jane and take her into the household where she was at present a guest. Her hostess had no objection, but having birthed two children of her own, she suggested that it might be unwise to disturb a new mother just yet. Instead, Susanna returned to Jane's lodgings accompanied by a maidservant, a quiet girl content to sit in a corner and sew, and bringing with her an ornate wooden cradle.

The next time the exhausted mother awoke, she stared at Susanna in blank incomprehension. Then a smile blossomed on her pale face. "I remember you. You came with the midwife."

Susanna nodded. "Jane," she said in her gentlest voice, "how would you like to live in the country?"

The vacant expression returned, making Susanna wonder if she understood that any other place existed outside the slums of London.

"My friend Master Baldwin has a manor in Northamptonshire, near Rockingham Forest. He raises sheep there to make wool."

"Sheep?" Jane sounded doubtful.

"You need not have anything to do with them if you do not want to. I am certain there is plenty of other work—in the dairy and in the house. You'll have livery to wear and good food to eat. Master Baldwin's housekeeper and the man she is about to marry, who is steward there, will take good care of you and your child."

Tears welled in Jane's eyes. "My babies die."

"Yes, my dear. I know." Susanna moved to sit on the pallet and placed her hand over Jane's cold one. "But this child is different. See, she has her own cradle to sleep in." She set it rocking with her foot. Inside, the swaddled child was awake but not yet restless. A series of knotted bands kept her secured to knobs on the sides of the cradle. Even if it tipped over, the baby would not fall out.

Jane turned her face into the pillow. "It is always the same," she murmured. "I wake up and find them dead. He says I roll over on them in the night. Then he goes away, and the searchers come, and I have to leave the parish."

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"Yes," Susanna said. "I have spoken to Lawrence Whitney. I gather that he found you new lodgings every time."

At the name, Jane's eyes widened. Fear? Again, Susanna could not be certain. "Tell me about him, Jane. Do you love him?"

Jane said nothing.

The midwife had been right, Susanna thought. Jane might be simple, but she was not stupid. She had the mind of a child of eight or nine. She was capable of deceit, of stubborn refusal to speak, of great loyalty, no matter how little deserved. But she could also be tricked into saying more than she realized about her own situation.

"This time your friend Lawrence Whitney will allow me to make the arrangements," she told Jane. He had better! "And it will also be my privilege to keep your daughter safe from accidents. You see, Jane. She has her own bed. No one can overlay her."

Still Jane said nothing.

"But we must talk about what happened before," Susanna continued, "so that it will never happen again." It might be beyond Jane's ability to explain what Susanna wanted to know, but there had been four deaths in a row, more than could be accounted accidental. The children could all have had some physical aberration, she supposed, a flaw in the lungs or heart, mayhap, that caused each sudden death, but Susanna still had to consider the possibility that one or more of the deaths had been deliberate murder.

Jane sniffled. "Will I be hanged?"

Susanna's breath stopped. She willed herself to be calm. Why should Jane think that a possibility? Had Whitney accused her of deliberately harming her own children? Had he threatened to report her if she did not continue as his mistress? Was that the cause of the fear she'd seen in Jane's eyes? With an effort she kept her voice level.

"No, Jane. You will be safe with me."

"Even if this baby dies too?" The child had begun to whimper. Susanna freed the infant from her cradle and handed her to Jane to nurse.

"No one will hang you," Susanna promised. She intended to remain with mother and child until they were safe in Northamptonshire. If the infant succumbed, it would not be to a murderous parent.

"He said I must hide. After. He said they'd think I done it apurpose."

"But you did not. You were asleep."

The beatific smile Jane wore as she looked down at her nursing babe vanished when she shifted her gaze to Susanna. Her face

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became a mask of horror. "The first one, I were suckling."

"In the bed?"

Jane nodded.

A few more questions elicited a clear picture. Jane had fallen asleep with her breast still in the child's mouth. When she'd awakened hours later, the baby had no longer been breathing. Susanna ruled it a tragic accident.

"Did the same thing happen with the next child?"

Jane shook her head. "I were careful, but the baby died anyway."

"You slept soundly and awoke to find your child overlaid?"

Jane frowned. "Seems like I dreamed." She continued to nurse the new infant, stroking the downy head with an absent motion.

"Dreamed what, Jane?"

Her voice puzzled, she murmured, "Pillows."

"You thought there were extra pillows? In the bed with you?"

She nodded.

Susanna leaned forward to take the sated girl child and replace her on her back in the cradle, which was closer to the charcoal brazier, the only source of warmth in the room. She did not take time to tie the strings. A new and troubling possibility sent her rushing back to the pallet to continue her interrogation of Jane Johnson.

"Did you sleep alone those nights, Jane?"

The young woman's forehead wrinkled with the effort it took to work out what Susanna meant.

"Was Lawrence with you?"

Face clearing, Jane smiled, glad to be able to answer Susanna's question. "He said I needed looking after with the new baby."

"So he was with you, each time, when you found your child had been overlaid?"

Tears sprang into Jane's eyes as she nodded.

Jane, Susanna thought, was not a murdering mother, but Lawrence Whitney might well have killed the infants. That explanation made more sense to Susanna than holding Jane responsible for four suspiciously similar "accidents." But what kind of man would deliberately smother his own children?

"Jane," she asked in a tentative voice, "did Lawrence ever strike you?"

Once again eager to please, Jane bobbed her head. "Said I needed to know my place. Said it were his duty to punish me for what I done."

"For the deaths of your babies?"

"For getting with child."

The words Whitney had spoken earlier came back to Susanna,

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rife with ominous meaning: *Such children do not thrive.* A chill ran through her. With sudden clarity, she understood that the type of man who would beat his mistress and blame her for being pregnant was also the sort who'd dispose of that child without a qualm.

Would he dare do so again? The risk he might, and try to dispose of Jane, too, had her speaking in a sharp voice to the maidservant, who had fallen asleep in her chair. "Go at once to Billingsgate and fetch Master Baldwin. He must come here at once and bring with him a wagon, that we may take Jane and her child away."

"But madam, it is full dark!"

"Take a torch. Hire a link boy." Susanna thrust several coins at her. "Go quickly."

When the reluctant girl had left, Susanna contemplated the chamber. She had miscalculated. Staying here with Jane once she'd told Whitney she knew he was the child's father had been a mistake. There was nothing in the room to use to defend Jane and the baby if Whitney planned to kill again. Susanna longed for a stout cudgel. Even more, she wished she'd asked Nick to stay here with her.

A pair of sewing scissors was the only potential weapon Susanna had found by the time she heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. She slipped behind the door just as it opened.

Unaware of Susanna's presence, Lawrence Whitney strode straight to Jane's pallet. He seized her roughly by the shoulders. "Jezebel! You betrayed me."

Taught long since to fear his brutality, Jane cowered before his attack, whimpering as she tried to defend herself with words. "I said naught to midwife nor vicar."

"You talked to someone else."

Silently pleading for help, Jane looked past Whitney's shoulder, searching for Susanna. He released her and whirled, an ugly look on his face. "I thought you'd gone."

"You saw my maidservant leave. She will return with Master Baldwin at any moment." Whitney was a coward at heart, Susanna thought. Why else would he come at night when he could enter by stealth? Why else would he wait until he thought Jane was alone? "You have just time to flee before he arrives."

Whitney's features settled into a smile so false no one but an infant would be deceived by it. "How can I go, Lady Appleton? I have a duty here."

"Do you mean to assume your parental responsibilities? Make arrangements for quarterly payments mayhap?"

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He glanced toward the cradle. "Ah, yes. The child."

Before Susanna could stop him, Whitney strode to the cradle and with a sudden kick of his leading foot against the rocker, flung the tightly swaddled infant out of her nest and straight toward the glowing coals in the nearby brazier. With a gasp of horror, Susanna rushed forward. Whitney tripped her before she'd gone a half dozen steps. The scissors she'd been holding behind her back flew from her hand and skittered out of reach under the chair.

"No!" Jane lunged from the bed as the linen swaddling bands began to smoke. With bare hands, she beat out the first tiny flames before they could spread.

The newborn screamed, indignant at having been ripped so precipitously from sleep. From the sound of those lusty yells, her flammable wrappings appeared to have protected her from taking harm in the fall. Susanna heaved herself upright to find Whitney, hands clasped to his ears, staring at his daughter through eyes that were wide and frantic.

"Make her be silent!" he bellowed. "Stop that noise!"

Jane stepped away from the baby and put her hands behind her back. Terrorized, confused, she suddenly seemed incapable of any action. The child on the floor wailed louder.

Whitney turned his wild-eyed gaze on Susanna. "This is all your fault. You meddled in matters that were none of your business."

With no more warning than that, he charged, striking Susanna across the face with the back of his hand. The blow sent her reeling into the wall. Pain lanced through her shoulder, joining the agony in her jaw, but she forgot both injuries when she saw that he'd overset the brazier. Within moments, the entire chamber could be afire. Whitney, a gleeful expression on his face, darted toward the door.

"Jane," Susanna screamed. "Save your child."

Staggering a little, Susanna herself ran toward the bed. She grabbed the heavy blanket and flung it atop the glowing coals, hoping to smother the flames aborning. Then, lifting her skirts out of the way, she used her sturdy boots to trample every escaping spark she could find.

The wails of Jane's infant continued unabated. Mercifully, she had been too far from the brazier to be burnt when it toppled over, for Jane had made no move to rescue her. Susanna gathered the baby into her own arms, soothing her with awkward pats and murmurs. Only then did she become aware of the sounds of a struggle behind her.

Jane's hands, those strong hands that had marked the midwife,

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were clamped tight around Whitney's throat. He staggered, flailing wildly, striking her repeatedly. She did not seem to notice the blows. Nor did she loosen her grip.

Susanna stood and watched as Whitney's face, already red, went purple as his struggles grew weaker. When he dropped to his knees, he took Jane with him, but still she did not let go, not until the man was limp and unresisting as a day-old fish.

Without a backward glance, Jane heaved herself off Whitney's body and reached for her baby. Susanna relinquished the infant, wincing as Jane accidentally bumped against her. Arm and face both throbbed, but she could not give in to the pain yet. First she had to make certain that the villain was dead. She knelt beside the body. No life pounded in the veins. No breath escaped those dead white lips. And all emotion had gone from the bulging eyes.

"He's escaped penance," she murmured, more to herself than to Jane. He would not have to endure the burden of supporting his daughter for the first seven years of her life. Instead he had been punished with a rough justice.

Belatedly, distracted from nursing her child, Jane seemed to realize what she had done. Her jaw went slack. "Will they hang me?"

"No." Susanna spoke with absolute certainty. "I can bear witness to all that happened here. This man tried to kill us—you, me, and your child. You prevented that, Jane. You saved all our lives. You will not be punished. Indeed, I mean to see to it that you are richly rewarded. Mayhap your own little cottage in Northamptonshire," she added, hearing a door slam below stairs and the familiar sound of Nick's voice. "You shall have a maid to help you with the baby and a generous stipend."

Jane made no response. Her attention had already shifted back to her child. The look on her face reflected naught but love and delight.

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Busman's Holiday

Visitors to **Kate's Mystery Books** in Cambridge, Massachusetts this spring may find the staff in an especially celebratory mood. The renowned bookstore will mark its twentieth anniversary in June with a party scheduled for Friday the 13th. In addition, a new publishing program debuted this season, also called Kate's Mystery Books and edited by store owner Kate Mattes.

The store, in its red Victorian house on Massachusetts Avenue, has long been an important presence in the Boston—and New England—mystery community; in fact, the New England chapter of the Mystery Writers' Association holds its meetings there.

With a few exceptions, the store focuses exclusively on mysteries, but within the field it offers the broadest possible selection. In addition, the store actively fosters a sense of community through author appearances, book groups, and a regular newsletter with reviews written by customers. "We're trying to provide a space where people can get together to talk about books and meet authors," says Mattes.

Asked about Boston-area writers, Mattes says, "I think everyone should read a Robert Parker, a Denis Lehane. Jane Langton builds her books around some place in the area—Memorial Hall in Cambridge, for instance." But Mattes is unwilling to limit herself to Boston and encourages readers to try such writers, such as Barbara Neely, who write about other parts of New England.

Meanwhile, as a publishing venture, Kate's Mystery Books is an imprint of the newly launched publisher Justin, Charles & Co. It debuted earlier this year with the publication of *Dead Clever* by Scarlett Thomas and *The White Trilogy* by Ken Bruen. Both are writers who have been published in the U.K. but who are as yet little-known in this country.

The logo for the imprint is a black cat, and visitors to the store will easily understand why. "I collect black cats that have a function: tea pots, letter holders, whistles, clocks," says Mattes. "I have about a thousand around the store, all over the tops of the shelves."

Another contribution to Kate's Mystery Books's distinctive decor is the tombstone set up out front with the store's address on it—a gift from MWA on the store's tenth anniversary. Fortunately for book lovers, Kate's Mystery Books, now completing its second decade, does not rest in peace.

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THE ROCK IN THE ORANGE GROVE

MITCH ALDERMAN

The gleaming billboard inside the barbed-wire fence promised an ornate wrought-iron entranceway complete with guard house and paving bricks for Dupree Overlook, the newest exclusive development in Polk County, which so far only delivered an aluminum gate propped open with a stick. The Ford Bronco dropped off the paved road onto the hardpan ruts crossing through the opening. The gate was shiny new, the ruts two generations old.

After he passed the sign, Bubba Simms lowered his window and squinted through the heat waves dancing on this mild Florida morning; it was barely ninety degrees, humidity hovering around seventy percent. Perfect weather for buzzards to float on the thermals, but there weren't any, yet. A trio of the unmarked Crown Victorias, four of the PCSD's celery green and white blue-light specials, and the sheriff's department crime scene van were clustered near the far end of four hundred yards of bulldozed land.

The streaks of red clay looked like scabs on the scraped hillside, where forty acres of prime Valencias had grown for forty years; the oval leaves of the surviving citrus trees along the ridge drooped sadly. Bubba decided to delay plunging into his day's boredom and instead visit the gathering.

He eased the Bronco along, looking at the grid of under-road being formed. Ground-level transformers sprouted at regular intervals. As he neared the first patrol car, a young deputy, tight-end-sized with weight room biceps, stepped away from the rear fender and held his palm up. His DI hat had textbook alignment against buzzed scalp. The uniform shirt tapered to his waist. Only sweat circles ruined the perfection.

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"You have to go back. No one is allowed any further," he said. The deputy glanced at the magnetic signs on the side of the Bronco, then stopped and peered. The signs said Polk County Cable Vision Sucks in script similar to that used on signs identifying the county monopoly, Polk County Cable Vision Services.

Bubba left the Bronco with his hand outstretched. The deputy frowned. At six five and three hundred pounds, Bubba startled strangers when he emerged from the Bronco.

"I don't believe we've met, Deputy Marks," Bubba said, reading the name tag. The deputy made no move to take his hand. Not knowing all the new patrolmen was one disadvantage of being retired from the sheriff's department.

"No, we haven't. Now climb back inside your vehicle and move away." A red flush showed on the deputy's neck when Bubba smiled.

A patrol car left the cluster thirty yards away and slid to a halt next to them. A wiry, dark-haired corporal got out of the car and hitched his weapons belt into place. "Run him off, Marks. We don't need him around here."

"Good morning, Ross. You in charge of crime scene?" Bubba asked.

"I'm the senior. Now get lost, Simms, or I'll have Marks toss you."

Marks was starting to speak when a thick man in a brown suit tapped his shoulder. "It's okay, Marks. He's harmless." Bubba nodded to Detective Ray Bisse; Ross stiffened.

Bubba pushed the bill of his BoSox cap up and said, "Good morning, Ray. What's happening?" The plainclothes detective smiled, his moon face benevolent except for the jagged scar across his chin. "The usual mess. Want to see?"

"But he's a civilian," the deputy protested, his face flushed.

"Last year he would've been your boss. He looked after this section of the county around Winter Haven. Shake hands with Sergeant Bubba Simms and then relax," the detective said. He lifted his Panama hat, stained with waves of humidity, and wiped his forehead with a bandanna.

"Oh, yeah, now I remember the name. You work for the Colonel, don't you?" the deputy asked, trying to crush the handshake.

Bubba let his eyes go quiet until the deputy squirmed. Finally, he released the hand. "Sometimes I do. I'm a private operator now."

"How does it feel to let scum out of jail, Buddy?" the deputy asked.

"Like the Colonel says: A reasonable charge for your reasonable doubt."

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"Beats doing what's right, does it?" Marks responded.

"Enough," Ray said, his smile fading. "Bubba, let's walk down. There are already enough strange tire tracks down there. First, remove your silly cloak of invisibility signs, then give Marks your keys. He'll move the Bronco out of the way before he drives up by the gate and positions his vehicle so that no one else can pass. That ought to secure the crime scene, shouldn't it, Corporal Ross? By the way, Marks, his name is Bubba, not Buddy. But try Mr. Simms since he's a civilian."

Marks scowled but nodded his head. Ross twitched. Bubba peeled the signs off the Bronco and tossed them onto the floorboard of the passenger's side.

They scanned the barren land as they walked toward the crime scene. Hundreds of indistinct footprints, tire tracks, and remnants of digging and covering pocked the land. Bisse shook his head. "How am I going to find a clue in that mess?"

"Little John Dupree got himself shot."

"Once upon a time, we tracked them across solid rock."

"During thunderstorms."

"At night, using the lightning flashes. . . . I could have moved my own vehicle."

"He needs some manners. Size and attitude have their limits, don't they?"

"Still beats small, mild, and meek." They both laughed. "So who died?"

Ray stopped, unlaced his wingtip, and shook sand out. Bubba kicked at the top layer of soil with his boot. There was moisture under the sand but dust was beginning to lift. "Little John Dupree got himself shot."

"No wonder you've got Ozymandias standing guard."

"Better'n Ozzy Osbourne."

"What happened?"

"Money, lust. Who knows? Look for yourself."

Three plainclothesmen leaned over the medical examiner's shoulder as he looked at a thermometer and shook his head. A crime scene tech was taking pictures. Uniformed deputies attached crime scene tape to surveyor stakes. Little John Dupree lay supine on the ground, his balding, pony-tailed head pointing toward a van-sized limestone boulder with bullet-marked beer cans sitting on its protuberances. A dark stain smaller than a dinner plate marked the center of his pale blue dress shirt. His arms

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were flung out and his khaki-clad legs were in a V as if he'd been making sand angels.

"He was taking target practice?" Bubba asked.

Ray pointed at the hood of the blue Ford Explorer with its driver's door open. A wooden Smith & Wesson presentation case lay open. "Model 29, .44 Mag. The revolver of choice for shooting rhinos."

"Bad ricochet?" Bubba asked. They edged closer. Wire flags marked a path where the deputies had walked. Bubba felt the sweat accumulating in the waistband of his jeans. He wanted to pull his shirttail out but couldn't with all the sheriff's men around. He'd preached often about the appearance of a deputy being the first line of law. Now he wished he'd advocated comfort first.

"I wish. Can't find the gun. Mrs. Wilson—you know Mrs. Wilson over the hill—heard shooting this morning about seven. She called and complained again. A deputy responded, found this, and puked. We think he heard the fatal shot."

"See anyone?"

Ray spat and looked around the empty development. Nothing showed above the surface except white PVC plumbing stubs. The nearest vegetation was about a quarter of a mile away, the closest structure barely visible at the edge of a swampy area next to Lake Hamilton. Mounded ash was scattered about where the extracted Valencias had been burned. A Caterpillar waited off to the left. "No one was here when the deputy arrived. Probably left on the back road by the Wilson house, but I called her and she says she didn't see anyone come by while she was knitting on the porch. You know this area. Can you think of another way out?"

They continued past the crime scene. The deputies nodded to them. The detectives looked up and shrugged. Bubba stopped and took his spiral-bound notepad out of his hip pocket. He made a brief sketch of the area, added the facts, then said, "Someone could have walked out. Over the ridge or through the groves."

"We have a couple of fresh boot tracks in some damp clay, looks like two different people. The hounds will be here soon. Maybe they can find a trail."

"Little John pursued his developments aggressively. He must have upset people, but I don't know anyone who wanted to shoot him."

"Neither do I. Maybe his family or his partners have some ideas. You hear anything, let me know. How's life with the Colonel?"

"Working with the best defense attorney around electrifies me. Provides an entirely new mission in life. In fact, today I'm deliv-

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ering checks and having papers signed, clearing up the final settlements from the sale of Marston's grove that used to be here. I still owe him seven hours on my retainer money this month. I was headed over to Mrs. Wilson's when I saw the crowd."

"Don't you feel the urge to be back here, teaching Marks how to be a deputy?"

"Keep Ross in his cage and Marks might be all right."

"There's the first media truck. Good old Channel 7. Live broadcasting, newsbreaking vultures. You better head out. Try not to let Marks arrest you. Let me know if you figure out who did it. That'll send Ross over the edge."

"I might just do that." They shook hands and Bubba walked away. Bisse looked across the open area and shook his head.

Sweat dripped off Bubba as he trudged to the Bronco, now parked off the roadbed in the sand about a hundred yards from the entrance. He climbed in and cranked the blessed A/C. He punched in the Colonel's private number on the car phone. The Colonel answered in his usual magnolias-and-mush voice.

"Colonel, those checks you gave me to distribute, did you make sure that the one from Little John cleared?"

"I am a lawyer; I trust no one. It was certified and cleared. Why?"

"Someone shot Little John out here at Dupree Overlook." Bubba pulled his shirt away from his skin and felt the cold evaporation. Some days he was just too big for Florida.

"Have mercy. The site of his greatest achievement. 'Homes for the Elite. A Hillside Retreat.' Any suspects?"

"None yet. I'll keep my nose in the air since I'm out this way anyhow."

"If someone tries to confess, give him one of my cards. Call me. Suspects are our meat and potatoes. But the checks are good."

Three more deputies had arrived and positioned their patrol cars to block the media van. Bubba wove the Bronco through them, waving to the deputies. He ignored the yells from Channel 7 and the glare from Marks. Ross, sitting in his car combing his hair, gave Bubba the finger. Bubba smiled. For ten years, he'd made sure that Corporal Ross never made sergeant.

Back on the highway, he drove south, turned left on Thompson Nursery Road, then pulled into a gravel driveway under a huge live oak. A white frame house with dark blue trim sat between two other old oaks. The yard was shady and the lawn was sparse. A grayhaired woman wearing jeans, running shoes, and a Winter Haven High School Blue Devils Marching Band Sponsor sweatshirt opened the screen porch door and waved.

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"Come in, Bubba, sit on the porch with me, have some coffee. Tell me about Little John getting plugged."

Bubba settled on the porch swing, listening to a solo trumpet play some sort of a Spanish-sounding tune. Mrs. Wilson brought him black coffee tingling with chicory. She settled into a rocking chair, shut the portable CD player off, and picked up her knitting basket. The needles began to click. "The coffee all right?"

"Tasty. What instrument do you play?"

She looked down at her shirt and laughed. "Back in 1932 they wouldn't allow me to march in the band playing the trumpet even though they had a football team. Now I make sure that any girl who wants to play the trumpet can. I buy at least one every year. I'm still waiting for a Millie Davis to emerge. . . . So someone shot him with that big old pistol of his?"

"Looks that way."

"For weeks I told him that I was going to have him arrested if he didn't quit shooting out there in the mornings. Bet he wished I had." She cackled.

"Did you see anyone coming through the back way?"

"Told that detective I didn't notice anyone coming out by our driveway. Of course, anyone could have driven away on the main road."

"A deputy was responding to your complaint and heard the final shot. Didn't see anyone on the main road."

"Hmm. I guess they could have walked. When I was young I thought nothing of walking over to Lake Hamilton to swim."

"They have dogs on the way to try to track anyone on foot."

"Well, anyone who did business with Little John probably had the impulse to shoot him. He's been after Harold to sell our home and the grove for one of his developments. He knew better than to talk to me about it. He couldn't deal with women who knew their minds. Would you like some crumb cake?"

Bubba thought hard, but he still felt full from breakfast. "I better not. I'm dieting, I'm within five pounds of my ideal weight. I have a check for you and a paper that needs your signatures. Is Harold around?"

"I cannot believe James Marston remembered that he promised us a share of the grove if he ever sold it. We sold him those three acres on credit fifty years ago. They don't make people like him anymore. Harold is fishing, but he's close by. Let me call him." Mrs. Wilson reached into her knitting bag and pulled out a cellular phone. When he answered, she told her husband to come home and sign those papers about the grove, and she had really big news for him when

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he got here. Her needles started clacking before she spoke again.

"If James hadn't died, Little John would never have bought that land for his development. As proud of that grove as he was, he'd never have sold it. But his heart gave out. That snippy daughter of his—just like her mother up in Atlanta—couldn't wait to sell. I bet it upset her plenty that her father remembered the people who helped him. She surely wouldn't have. More coffee?"

Bubba nodded. While he slowly swung, enjoying the breeze cooled by the shade, he heard a pickup arrive. The truck came up the back way and parked beside the house. Harold Wilson came through the porch door and brushed his boots on the mat. Short and skinny, he wore khaki work clothes and a wide-brimmed straw hat. Bubba stood and they shook hands. Harold sat down; he was reading the papers when his wife returned.

"Oh hi, dear. Do you want coffee too?" she asked. He nodded and went back to reading the papers.

"Too hot for me," he said when she came back with his mug. He fanned the brew. He sat it on the table beside his chair. "Got a pen?" he asked. Bubba handed him his. "This looks like standard gobbledygook. James was a good man," he said. He signed and handed the papers to his wife. She signed and handed the papers to Bubba.

"I thank you. Now do you have any idea where I can find Tom Johnson?"

"The last few years he stayed in that old shack on the grove, but that was bulldozed weeks ago," Harold answered. "He was part of the scenery around here. That old truck of his puttering past our house morning after morning so he wouldn't have to unlatch that barbed-wire gate on the highway. He had a house in the Villa. You might try Smokey's Barbecue. Somebody there will know."

Bubba nodded. The Villa was home to most of the laborers, the poor and the nearly poor. Winter Haven wasn't big enough to have a ghetto, or even an economic redevelopment area, but it had always had the other side of the tracks. Smokey's straddled that boundary. Both populations enjoyed the restorative powers of hickory smoke and in the past, when the county was dry, brown-bagged pints of whiskey and gin.

After the Wilsons, there was a check to be delivered for an irrigation pump that somehow had been forgotten for over a year until Marston died. Bubba drove south to Lake Wales to secure the right signature. That settled one more claim against the grove. It was noon when Bubba reached the Villa, so looking for Tom Johnson was not a strain. Bubba parked under an oak tree in the

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back of Smokey's and carried his briefcase inside. The sit-down area was packed and the take-out line had reached the doorway when Bubba walked in. The harried cashier told him to relax, they'd find him a table in a second. He asked if Tom Johnson was there. Last table in the right corner, she said without looking up.

Bubba walked over to where a broad-shouldered man in work clothes was pushing chopped pork onto a plastic fork with a slice of white bread. He had a Kubota Tractor cap pushed back on his bald head.

"Mr. Johnson?" Bubba asked. The man looked up, then lost his smile. His gaunt face had deep vertical lines and pronounced crow's feet from squinting into too many treetops during the day. Chocolate eyes blinked at Bubba.

"You're Sergeant Simms, aren't you?"

"I'm plain Bubba Simms, retired. I'm a private detective now."

"Many a time I've seen you patrolling the Villa. You didn't bust heads." Tom sat his fork down and reached out to shake. "What can I do for you?" He indicated for Bubba to sit on the other side of the table.

"You have money coming to you from the sale of the Overlook Grove. The Colonel has me distributing checks and getting papers signed."

"The Colonel represented me with Workmen's Comp one time. Mr. Marston talked him into it after I got hurt disking the grove. They said my limp wasn't worth anything. The Colonel convinced them otherwise."

"He's good at that." Bubba opened his briefcase and pulled out a manila folder.

A waitress appeared and asked, "What do you want, Bubba?"

"Half-chicken, beans, potato salad, Texas toast, cole slaw. Unsweetened tea."

"Unsweetened tea. You must be dieting. About time, too," she told him and walked away.

Tom laughed. "They don't hold back, do they? You are some big. Once, I was a big man. Now I'm all bone and loose skin. Hell being old with nothing to do."

"Maybe this money will help out. Buy a big screen TV. Take a cruise."

Tom guffawed, people looked over at them. Tom wiped his eyes, regained control, and said, "I haven't even been to Disney World, thirty minutes away. A cruise? Thanks, I needed a laugh. But I don't need money. Mr. Marston always looked after me. He actually paid my Social Security when the others in this town thought

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they didn't need to waste their money on us grove people. My house is paid for. I can afford to eat here every day. And TV is awful even with cable; have you noticed no one ever actually does any work on TV? Talk about their work, but never do it. I wish I had some work."

"After twenty years with the sheriff, I'm just now finding comfort working alone. A lot of boredom. Anyway, here's the check and the papers that you need to sign."

"Can't read. But I see those numbers real plain. Mr. Marston was a good man, alive and dead. More than I can say for Little John Dupree."

"You heard?"

"Lord yes. The word's everywhere. Done been shot with that big pistol of his. Good riddance. He ruined my grove. You know that grove?"

"I patrolled there on Saturday nights, especially with the full moon. That view of Lake Hamilton brought out the young lovers."

"Some old ones, too. I never went there much at night. I always got there at sunrise. Cleaned up the beer cans and mess after the weekend, then I'd start taking care of the grove. Wasn't that a fine grove?"

"Beautiful. Trees too big for modern tastes, though."

"Little bitty trees trimmed all alike, no thorns, makes it easy to caretake. Not us. Me and Mr. Marston started clearing that land and planting seedlings in 1939. When I came back from World War II, we finished it. Spent every day except Christmas and Easter looking after that grove, and Little John Dupree turned it to ash."

"It's going to be a really fine housing project."

"It already was a really fine Valencia grove." Tom pushed pork onto his fork and began to chew. The jaw muscles rippled under his thin skin.

The waitress spread plates in front of Bubba and asked, "Anything else, boys?" Bubba shook his head and squeezed the lemon into his tea. The chicken needed salt, a touch of sauce.

"My neighbor's girl reads real good, teaches at the community college. Let me have those papers. Then I'll call you." Tom pushed his plate away, drained the last of the tea. "Pleasure meeting you, Mr. Simms."

"Likewise, Tom. Call me." Bubba handed him a card and asked for Tom's address. He wrote it in his notepad.

"You could solve Little John's death. Give you something to kill the boredom," Tom said after he stood up.

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"That's sheriff's business, not mine anymore. We'll let the Colonel pay for our lunches. Business," Bubba said. Tom smiled okay, then made his way through the crowd with his clothes hanging loose, shuffling in hightop canvas sneakers. Bubba enjoyed his meal, resisted the peach cobbler, and left to deliver another check.

The phone rang in the Bronco. He answered and a familiar voice asked, "Ready for some fun?" It was Ron Guilledge, a bail bondsman in Bartow, the county seat. His office waited across the street from central booking, his sign the first thing people saw after visiting a loved one.

"Not your idea of fun. Who are you going after?"

"Harry Crued missed his court appearance this morning. Have to have him back today or my fifty-thousand-dollar bond's forfeit."

"No, not again. I don't want any part of that shaved-head, crank-making snake. Once was enough."

"Ah, Bubba, I just want you to distract him. I'll pop him with the Taser and slip the cuffs on. Piece of cake."

"Last time he bit the Taser leads in two and I had to put the cuffs on him by myself. Besides, I have work for the Colonel that needs finishing."

"I'll shoot him in the back this time. Please, Bubba. Harry respects you."

"He respects my 12-gauge shotgun. Probably hiding at his mother's again, isn't he?"

"Of course."

"She'll have that skillet. Keep her off my back."

"My brother can do that. Meet me at my office in an hour?"

"Five hundred."

"Three. You already caught him once. Second time should be cheaper."

"Five."

"Five. See you in an hour."

Bubba headed home to change. No use wrestling a crankhead in good jeans. As he worked the Bronco through the S-curves past Avenue T, blue, blue, blue flashed in his rearview mirror. He pulled into the lot of an abandoned RV repair shop and stopped under the skimpy shade of an awning. The patrol car parked behind him. Bubba stepped out. Deputy Marks walked up, straightening his hat.

"You were running forty-two in a thirty-five, Mr. Simms."

"Call me Bubba. I'm sorry about that. I was heading out to help the Guilledges bring back Harry Crued. He's skipped his court appearance."

"Defense lawyers and bondsmen, you do associate with the finest."

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"The Chamber of Commerce almost never gets arrested. You might remember that ordinary people commit crimes, too. It's not as simple as discovering scum and arresting them."

"We didn't get off on the right foot this morning." Marks stuck out his hand. Bubba shook it with a normal grip. Marks grinned.

"I had to direct traffic for two hours after you left. Ray said it would be good for my soul. . . I shouldn't have puked near the crime scene. I'll be living that one down for a time."

"No problem. Was that your first homicide?"

"Yes, and it shook me for a while. I was angry with myself and let it affect dealing with you. But after you left, I heard Corporal Ross trashing you. I thought I ought to talk to you again."

"Does Ross still advocate a thump upside the head?"

"Tried to show me the advantage of sap gloves. I already decided that if Ross says go, I stop. So if he hates you so much, you might be all right. And your signs've been bugging me all day." Bubba leaned against the Bronco. Marks propped his spit-shined jump boot on the other end of the bumper.

"Guys our size are never going to be unnoticed, so we have to be ignored if we want to observe someone. I've found that with two traffic cones, a hard hat, fluorescent vest, clipboard, and what looks like an official vehicle I can park anywhere and putter around for hours. So I have signs that only appear official. They amuse me, but Ray thinks they're stupid. Yesterday I was checking on a bad back for an insurance company. Private eye glamour."

"It took me a couple of looks before I was sure they were bogus."

"They come up with anything useful at the scene?"

"Not much. The family and the corporation are offering a ten-thousand-dollar reward for information leading. That'll bring out the phone calls. I'll be talking to squirrels for the next few days. There are never enough detectives to handle the calls."

"Was the gate closed when you got to Overlook?"

"Closed but unlocked, chain hanging loose. I propped the gate open and drove in. I could see across the cleared land. I saw the Explorer, but no one came toward me. And it had only been a couple of minutes since I had heard the shot from that direction. A minute earlier and I might have had them. Been good for my career."

"Walking up on a smoking .44 Mag could have gotten you killed, too."

"Well, that would have been a bad career move. Which brings me to why I stopped you. You, being a wader in deep scum, might hear something useful. I can't get the reward so anything you find is yours."

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"Do you actually think that bunch of lawyers and developers would pay?"

"Probably fine print somewhere in the offer. But I could use the collar and you can use a new friend in the department. If you need help, call me."

"If I think of anything, I'll let you know. Want to come help wrestle Harry?"

"No glory in that."

"Just honest work. Where do you lift?"

"Woody's Gym in Auburndale."

"I'm at Big Al's Iron Works mornings, early. Stop by. See what you can do."

"I'll take you up on that, old man."

"Old enough to shame you. Simple advice. Just listen to the people you meet. Be polite. You'll hear things."

"And you slow it down on the curves. That Bronco leans like a tower."

The light was blinking on his answering machine when Bubba entered his office feeling right after a good workout and a better breakfast. He turned on the A/C to circulate the mustiness. His rent was cheap and the location in downtown Winter Haven above the closed furniture store was convenient to home, but sharing the second story with repossessed mattresses, bedroom suites, and stacks of chrome dining room chairs lacked something in ambience. He started the Mr. Coffee, then punched the replay button. He sat in his swivel chair and propped his boots up on the corner of the desk. The first message was from Tom Johnson that he had read the papers. The second was from Ray to call him on his car phone. Bubba returned the call and heard the rush of traffic when Ray answered.

"You called?" Bubba asked, holding the phone with the crook of his neck.

"I hear you won a split decision yesterday."

"Unanimous." Bubba touched the puffiness under his right eye. "Harry won't be walking good for a few days."

"Everyone sends their congratulations. Even the jailers, as much as they like Mother Crued's cookies on visitors' day, have been wanting to dropkick Harry through the goal posts of life."

"Glad I could spread some sunshine. What's happening?"

"I'm on the way to question the Widow Dupree. You figured it out yet?"

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"Not yet. The day's young. You think MaryJean's big enough to shoot the Model 29? It would have sprained her wrist. Shake her hand and you'll know."

"It's doubtful that she shot him, but she might know something. Particularly, she might know who cleaned out Dupree Overlook's bank account last night."

"The Elite Retreat is defunct?" Bubba reached over without lowering his feet, poured himself a cup, and then sipped.

"You didn't hear that from me. Wire transfer to the Cayman Islands."

"I bet there are some irate plumbers and road graders this morning. That screech you hear is the halt to Overlook Dupree."

"I wonder if Little John didn't do creative financing this time. Maybe added a cup of Tide and some Clorox to a load. Wrong spin cycle could get you shot."

"Shot dead. Anything else turn up at the crime scene?" Bubba asked.

"Not much. Two boot tracks in damp clay from the previous night's rain. One size nine left and one size twelve right. Work boots. I wish I knew how the shooter left. The dogs tracked to where a vehicle was parked, truck tires, then nothing."

"They didn't walk out?"

"They drove. But we can't figure out where they went, unless Marks got his timing wrong."

"What's Marks doing today? Washing the sheriff's car?"

"He's been forgiven. He's on patrol, handling some hotline tips that don't seem like they relate to Little John."

"Good for him. Be nice to MaryJean. I'm going to finish my coffee, eat a donut, and do some thinking. If I figure anything out, I'll call you." Bubba hung up and sipped his coffee. After a time, he called the Colonel's private number and told him about the missing funds. He asked the Colonel questions about the past. After he got the answers, he doodled on his blotter. Then he turned off the Mr. Coffee, loaded his briefcase, and left.

In the Bronco, Bubba called Detective Bisse. "I'm on my way to deliver papers to Tom Johnson, he used to work for Marston at the Overlook Grove. Spent a lot of time there. He knows more about that area than anyone."

"He's not on the list of people who should be around the development."

"Just wanted to let you know that was where I was going in case you wanted to stop by. Maybe you and Deputy Marks and I could

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go to lunch after I finish if you invite him to join us. The address is 1344 Redberry Lane in the Villa."

Ray was quiet. Bubba could hear travel static on the car phone. Finally, Ray answered, "I'm heading in the wrong direction, but we'll be there."

Bubba found the address and pulled into the front yard beside a red GMC pickup showing rust along the tailgate. The yard was cracker—grassless with packed sand that showed rake marks. No sign of flowers. Two towering chinaberry trees flanked the squat concrete block house. The white paint was new. Knocking on the screen door, Bubba heard the attic fan, felt the breeze pulled into the house. Tom Johnson came to the door and held it open.

Bubba entered to the smell of bacon. Tom pointed at a chair in the living room. "Sit, want some coffee?" Bubba nodded. He shuffled around, slippers flopping, then handed Bubba a mug. He returned to his breakfast at the table behind the half wall separating kitchen from living room. "That's some eye you got. Didn't have it yesterday. Must be like TV for you private eyes."

"Helped bring in a bail jumper. He head-butted me. I must be getting old, careless, or something." Bubba sipped the harsh coffee. It tasted like bachelor coffee, fresh grounds on top of the old, saved using a new filter. Bubba had learned the taste after his divorce.

"We all get old. At least you still got something to do. All I got is watching them pave over my grove."

"There's not going to be much paving. With Little John dead, they halted work. No one seems to know how the financing works on the project. They'll eventually figure it out, but for now, it sits."

Tom chewed on a bacon rind. "It's a waste, isn't it?"

"A waste. You loved that grove, didn't you?"

Tom nodded and said, "I was married for thirty years. She died twelve years ago. We never had children. I couldn't lie abed, so every morning I sat on that big old rock with my Thermos. It was too big for us to remove in '47 when we found it. So I'd climb up and watch Lake Hamilton turn blue when the sun came up. I miss my wife. But when that first Caterpillar roared into the Valencias, I hurt worse. 'Course, things affect old people more." Tom pushed the plate away.

"I called the Colonel before I came out here. He needs these papers signed and the checks distributed. I told him I'd finish it today. I also told him about how no one heard or saw anyone yesterday when Little John was shot. How Deputy Marks was coming up the main road and how the only other way out the back road by Mrs. Wilson's house. And she didn't hear anyone."

"Old woman like that might not hear a marching band."

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"Or hear something that she's heard every morning for forty years. I told the Colonel about how the sniffer dogs tracked someone who must have gotten into a truck and driven away. About boot tracks, one size nine, the other size twelve. The Colonel was quiet for a while. Then he told me exactly why you deserved Workmen's Compensation."

"Colonel always talk about clients' business that way?" A note of anger crept into Tom's drawl. The fingers of his right hand drummed beside his plate. "You just can't quit being a cop? Work just stays with you?"

"He reminded me that I work for him. Anything he told me and anything anyone who was a client said to me couldn't be repeated. Confidentiality."

"Bubba Simms, priest."

"You want to confess?"

"No." He drummed his fingers some more. "But I wouldn't mind discussing what-ifs. Like what if a man found a really nice pistol like this one?" Tom lifted a dishtowel and the chrome of the Model 29 revolver emerged.

"That would be a thing I couldn't tell. That I wished I didn't know."

Tom threw the dishtowel onto the counter. "A man might not trust another man who'd been a cop as long as he had."

"He would if he knew that the cop had been keeping his word longer than he'd been a cop."

"A man might discuss things then. About how he found someone shooting an old friend. He might have asked the shooter, 'Why did you bulldoze the grove? Why do you have to shoot the rock?'

"And he might have answered, 'I'm shooting the rock because today that Caterpillar is going to bust it into gravel and we are going to use the scraps for a drainage line. I bulldozed the grove because it would be a shame to waste this view on trees. Make some good money. Make yards for people who like big yards.'

"And a person might have said, 'But you already got more money than you will ever spend, there's a lot of places for yards.' Places that don't have a grove that was older than he was.

" 'So what. Grove's just a bunch of trees.' And he might have kept shooting that rock while he talked. I loved that grove. Spent my whole life helping it grow. Didn't have no bulldozer, only a Tomdozer. Busted my back ripping out palmettos and scrub oaks, burned 'em, planted the root stock, grafted the Valencias. Carried water in buckets to keep 'em alive until we could afford irrigation. Sprayed for bugs, mildew, and everything else. Stayed up all night burning

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smudge pots all those winter freeze nights 'til we learned it didn't do any good. That grove was my life. And he just laughed. It was just a business. Land was worth more as a development, not an orange grove. Simple numbers. Progress. Can't argue with the numbers. Like hell I can't. Life's not numbers. Life's caring about something."

Bubba sat the cup on the floor, trying not to interrupt the flow of the tale.

" 'You old fool, it's who has the most when they die that wins,' he might have said. Then he might have laughed and went to set the beer cans up on the rock again. I might have said that he had no right to destroy so much beauty just for money." Tom lightly caressed the walnut grip of the pistol. His eyes were unfocused. Bubba felt his chest tightening as Tom talked.

"Spent every day looking after that grove, and Little John Dupree turned it to ash."

"He might have started yelling. Told me to stay off his land, that I had no right to be there, never, ever come back. He'd have me arrested. His yelling made me angry. Then I might have found that pistol. His eyes might have growed really big when he turned around.

" 'Now look here,' he might have said. 'The grove's gone. Nothing will bring it back. I can give you more money if that's the problem.'

" 'More money is always the problem. You win,' I might have said. That gun shoots straight, kicks hard. But I have strong hands. Still had it when I got to my truck. Mrs. Wilson never looked up. Mr. Wilson's boat was gone. I drove home."

"That's an interesting possibility. What are you going to do now?" Bubba felt his shirt sticking to his ribs as he tried to take a deep breath.

"Sign them papers for you, so you can leave. Endorse that check and give it over to my neighbor. She's got one still in college. Then decide what's next. I'm glad you're my priest, seems appropriate since I'm not a church-going man. I'd hate to have to make a quick decision what to do with this big pistol." Tom lifted the pistol. He pointed it at the television to the left of Bubba.

"Some decisions shouldn't be rushed," Bubba said, ignoring the red-dot front sight on the long barrel. His shirt felt wet and heavy.

"Hand me a pen. I'll sign these papers. Where's the check?"

Bubba took a deep breath, laid his briefcase on his lap, and

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opened it. He found the check and handed Tom a pen. Tom signed his name on the papers, then on the back of the check. He walked over to the counter and took an envelope from a drawer. Bubba knew he might possibly be able to cross the room and take the gun, but he worked for lawyers now and Tom was his client. Clients were entitled to make decisions, though they were not allowed to shoot messengers, so Bubba kept his hand on the Browning HiPower in the briefcase. Tom painstakingly wrote a name on the outside of the envelope.

"Would you do me a favor? Write a note saying this is for the boy's schooling? In payment for all her help when my wife was dying?"

"Want to talk to the Colonel? He said to call if I had any trouble knowing the right thing to do."

"The right thing? There might be some wide dispute about that. No, this will be all right for me."

Bubba wrote a brief note and handed it to Tom. He signed it and tucked it into the envelope, then said, "I'm not as ashamed as I should be, but I am disheartened. All my trees were gone and I was angry with his disrespect for my life's work. I had forgotten how easy it was to kill a man and how hard it is to forget. That hasn't changed since World War II. He shouldn't have yelled at me. I'm old, but I'm still a man."

Bubba took the papers, put them into his briefcase. Tom held out the envelope. "Slide this under her door, will you? The frame house next door. I'd walk over but these slippers fill with sand."

"In a few minutes, a detective is coming by to ask you if by chance you saw anything that morning."

"You tell him something so you could get that reward?" Tom stood straight, his hand touched the table.

"I can't get any reward. For the same reason I can't reveal anything you might say. Want me to take that pistol for you?"

"No. It might come in handy. Shoot snakes. Or something. . . . I don't think an old man who spent his life loving an orange grove, sitting on a rock every morning, would want to be inside for very long, do you?"

"No, I imagine that being inside would be awful, but remember that they are just doing their job. They kind of like going to work every day, too." Bubba shut the briefcase and stood.

"I think I want to put on my boots. These slippers are ugly."

Bubba took the envelope and they shook hands. Bubba resisted the urge to wrestle Tom to the ground and call for backup. He walked out and turned right. The envelope slid through the gap under the neighbor's door. He had reached the Bronco just as Deputy Marks

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pulled in. Then Corporal Ross rolled up and stopped behind the Bronco. Marks got out and put on his hat. He was crisp and tan.

"Morning, Bubba. Detective Bisse's on his way, caught in traffic."

"I'm here on business for the Colonel. Tom Johnson's a client."

"I appreciate you asking Ray to call me. What's going on?"

"I can't talk about anything. When Ray gets here, just knock on Mr. Johnson's door and speak to him. With respect. He's an old man, but not useless."

"What are we waiting on?" Ross asked. "Let's go knock on Mr. Johnson's door, see what he knows. We don't need a detective to knock on Mr. Johnson's door. I been knocking on doors in the Villa for fifteen years." He hitched up his weapons belt and took two steps toward the house.

"Anything else, Bubba?" Marks asked, still standing beside the Bronco.

"Wait for Detective Bisse. Ray will show you how to walk softly; you never know who's holding a big stick."

"That's the kind of bull advice Simms was always giving out. Let's go do our job. Good thing I heard the call and came along." Ross pulled his baton from his belt. "Let's go, kid. I want to make sergeant before I retire."

"I'm warning you not—"

"Shut up before I arrest you for interference," Ross said as he waggled the baton under Bubba's chin. Smiling, he headed across the yard.

Bubba looked at Marks, who shrugged.

"I have to go. Tell Detective Bisse I wanted to wait for him." He turned and followed Ross.

Bubba nodded, picked up the car phone, and punched 911. He heard the bang, bang of the baton and the bellow to open the door. Bubba opened his briefcase. There was a boom and Ross flew backwards. Marks threw himself sideways behind the concrete block wall. Bubba told the operator to send an ambulance, then dropped the phone and grabbed the HiPower.

Marks crawled forward and grabbed Ross's ankle to pull him out of the way. As he pulled, he shouted into his hand-held radio that an officer was down. Bubba took position behind the left-hand chinaberry tree. Then a few seconds later, another boom, followed by the whoop-whoop of an approaching police car.

Marks knelt and peered into the corner of the front window. He turned away and threw up on Ross, who was slapping at his vest. Detective Ray Bisse brought his car to a halt between the chinaberry trees and the whoop ended.

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REMEMBER JACK

GEOFFREY HITCHCOCK

The last words Bob Sutherland's wife had said to him that Monday afternoon were "don't sleep at the wheel." He had sat in the car with the engine running, listening to her interminable string of instructions; then when he had finally managed to break away and the car was rolling down the driveway, she had called out, "Remember Jack and don't sleep at the wheel."

But setting out on a journey from Orewa to Taupo at four thirty in the afternoon meant he had to contend with the peak traffic through Auckland, and staying alive required all his attention without thinking about Jack or even about Megan. Once he had turned off onto S.H. 2 things were pleasanter, with just enough traffic to keep his attention on the road, but once he was on S.H. 27 the traffic practically disappeared. The road wound up over some hills and there was a rest area at the top where Myra had instructed him to stop. It was a pleasant spot overlooking the Hauraki Plains but Bob wasn't in the mood. He drove straight on and began to think about Jack, who had dozed off on his way from Wellington to visit Bob and Myra in Taupo. His car had swerved across the road and hit a substantial power pole to nobody's benefit. Bob and Myra had driven to Waioura Military Hospital where Jack had been patched up. He looked ghastly but it was mostly superficial.

Bob hoped he wouldn't find his pretty daughter looking like that. All he knew was that she had had an accident and was in Taupo Hospital "in satisfactory condition." What did that mean? Why hadn't Megan phoned herself? Bob, with a little urging from Myra, had decided to go see for himself. A pity his wife had had to stay behind to tend to a sick sister—he could have done with some company. It was some time since he had made a long trip alone, and he was beginning to feel his seventy-three years.

He began to feel drowsiness creeping over him and he thought about Jack again. Jack had said thank goodness he hadn't picked up any hitchhikers. It would have been too terrible to have injured

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or even killed anyone. But Bob had thought that if Jack had had somebody to talk to—and Jack was an adept at the art of conversation—he would never have fallen asleep. Now he felt that if he had somebody to talk to it would keep him awake, and keep his mind off Megan, too.

So when a few miles farther on he saw a man striding purposefully along with arm outstretched and thumb raised, he slowed down. The man was dressed in neat blue jeans and a green parka-like jacket and had a cheerful ruddy face framed by a neatly trimmed black beard and black curly hair, which though plentiful, was not too long to put old-fashioned Bob off. Local farmhand on his way to the pub, he thought as he pulled up.

"Care for a lift?"

The man opened the door and got in. "Ta. Been walking for a whole bloody hour. Began to think I'd have to walk the whole bloody way to Napier."

Bob felt just a trifle uneasy. Damn! I've picked up a tramp. Still it can't be helped and he seems pleasant enough.

The man turned out to be a talkative sailor who had spent his week's leave in Auckland and been robbed of his money and spare clothes.

"I thought you were traveling light," Bob said.

The man grimaced. "That's one reason nobody would pick me up I guess, and I have to be in Napier by morning to catch my ship."

"I'm only going to Taupo."

"It's a good start, and there'll be timber trucks going through tonight, won't there?"

Bob was beginning to feel sorry for the man. After all, it wasn't his fault that motorists were wary of picking up strangers.

"Tell you what, there's a cafe just a mile or so up the Napier road where truckies stop for food and fuel. I'll drop you off there and then drive back to Taupo. You'll be bound to get a lift from there."

"That's uncommon good of you. You're a real gentleman."

Bob felt completely reassured by this speech. Nevertheless, when another figure loomed up at the roadside with arm outstretched, he had no intention of stopping. His passenger had other ideas.

"Hey, that's me mate. He doesn't seem to have had much better luck than me. D'you think you could squeeze him in?"

There was nothing in the back seat but the picnic basket Myra had packed for him. He could think of no reason to say no. He stopped the car and the second man got in and plonked himself on

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the back seat—a thickset swarthy man, part Maori or Islander but morose, with none of the cheerful good graces of the Polynesians. He settled himself in without uttering a word.

"This is George. He's not very talkative. Not like me. I'm Cyril, by the way, but they call me Cy."

Bob felt he must be sociable. "I'm Bob."

"Bob's a good joker, George, he's going to drive us to Napier."

"To Taupo."

"Yeah that's right, to Taupo. You live in Taupo, Bob?"

Bob explained about his daughter who was in hospital with a broken leg and numerous other injuries.

"Oh, bad luck for her—but good luck for us, eh George?"

The complete lack of concern in Cy's tone disturbed Bob and for the first time he felt a little frightened. For no reason at all, he told himself. A minute later he changed his mind about that.

Cy twisted in his seat and addressed George. "Where's Bernie?"

"Inside, I guess."

"Bugger! How?"

"We was walking through this supermarket car park, wasn't we. Some silly bugger left his car keys in so we hops in. Seems like a stroke of luck, but then the stupid Bernie backs out at full tilt and smashes into the car behind and takes off with tires screaming like a TV movie. He had to slow down at the car park exit so I hops out bloody quick di'n I. They were after him by then with sirens screaming. Don't reckon the silly sod had a bloody hope." It was a long speech for George.

"Bugger," said Cy again, "the stupid sod. Wasn't he a stupid sod, Bob?"

Bob said nothing; he was too horrified to speak. What had he got himself into? Then his wits reasserted themselves. He must play along with these rogues until some opportunity came for him to ditch them. So when Cy, with some menace in his voice, said, "I asked you a question Bob," he was able to reply quite calmly, "Oh sorry, I thought it was just rhetorical."

"It was just a plain question, wasn't Bernie stupid?"

"Yes he was. If I wanted to steal a car from a crowded car park, I would simply drive it away as if I owned it."

"Bob's not a fool," Cy said to George. George grunted.

After a while Bob spoke again, "Furthermore, if I was on the run and didn't want to attract attention, I wouldn't steal a car at all."

"What would you do, Bob?"

"I'd simply ask for a lift like you and George have done—no questions asked, no tales told, no unpleasantness."

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"I like you Bob. You got real sense and you're a gentleman on top of it. The last thing I'd want is any unpleasantness."

A car was coming toward them. Bob thought of swerving from side to side across the road so that he would be reported to the police. But there were no police nearby and he would lose the villains' confidence. He drove straight on and the car swished by. Cy had been watching him narrowly—may even have noticed his white knuckles. Now he nodded his head and smiled. "Good thinking, Bob, you're quite right. We don't want to attract attention."

"No," Bob said as casually as he could.

"Good man. There'll be no unpleasantness."

George didn't even grunt.

Bob began to panic. They would make him drive them to Napier where they would tie him up where he wouldn't be found until their ship had sailed. Myra would start worrying when he didn't phone, but would she do anything in time to do him any good? He doubted it. He just had to get rid of them somehow. Suddenly it all seemed simple. He had to stop for petrol—even they couldn't deny that—and while the tank was being filled he'd walk away and not come back. Then they would steal his car or, if they were as wise as Cy made out, they would disappear into the fast gathering darkness.

Waharoa was coming into sight. There was a reasonable filling station on the left and a car was just pulling away from the pumps. Bob started to slow down and at once Cy was on the alert. "What are you doing?"

"We have to get petrol," Bob said in as reasonable tone as he could manage. "I was planning to fill up at Matamata but it's quieter here."

"Keep going." There was no doubt that Cy meant it but Bob kept slowing and pulling in to the left.

"I said keep going!" Bob felt something poke into his ribs. A quick glance and he saw the gun. He pulled back into the road and accelerated.

"That's better. Now Bob, I'm sorry you had to try something foolish. I wouldn't have had this happen for the world. It could all have been so pleasant."

"It could all have been pleasant if you had let me get the petrol and if you hadn't talked so much. I'd have driven you to Taupo and you'd have got a lift to Napier and nobody the wiser. Now you've got me involved."

"You could be right—I do tend to talk too much—but you must look at it from my point of view. Me and the other two had a simple

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scheme for a little redistribution of wealth. It could have all been very friendly and pleasant but somebody had to play the hero and unfortunately my gun went off."

"He's trigger happy," said George.

"You'd have heard about it when we got to Taupo and you'd have been able to put the cops on our track. That's why we have to take you all the way to Napier. Sorry for the inconvenience but you must see how it is."

Bob saw. "You're mad," was all he could think of to say. Cy nodded agreeably. "It's a possibility I've often considered myself. But it doesn't affect the situation, does it? So be a good fellow and drive on sensibly. It can still be very pleasant."

Bob drove on. He felt sick with fear but he didn't seem to have much option. The gauge was reading well below the quarter mark. They'd have to get petrol soon. Maybe it would run out and they'd have to truss him up and leave him in a ditch while they hitched another lift. It seemed the best he could hope for.

Through Matamata—Tirau—Putaruru—the car kept going. The needle would touch zero and then float up a little. They must surely stop at Tokoroa. There were still some cars on the road. A few of them overtook them. The gun pressed harder in his ribs as he ignored them.

Tokoroa at seven forty-five was fairly quiet but there was still too much traffic about. "Keep going," said Cy.

Bob began to relax; some of the knots in his stomach came untied. The gauge had been showing zero for ages. The next all-night station was at Wairakei, forty miles away. There were a couple of pumps in between, near Atiamuri, but they would be shut by now.

The lights were still on.

"Pull in here," ordered Cy, "and leave everything to me. Don't move or say a word or George will slit your throat." Bob winced as a sharp knife pricked the back of his neck. "Steady George, we haven't finished with him yet." George just grunted. Bob pulled up at a pump and sat frozen with terror.

Cy dropped the gun in his pocket and jumped out. The door of the office was shut but there was a light inside. He knocked on the door and opened it. "Sorry to bother you mate but we're right out of gas."

"Then you're lucky—I was just about to lock up—I usually shut long before this."

"Thank goodness you didn't. My dad's got a bit of a stiff neck and forgot to check the gauge 'till we were well past Tokoroa.

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We'd never get to Wairakei." All this spoken in disarming tones. A burly young Maori in a white boiler suit came out and put a hose in the tank. "What'll it be?"

"Fill her up, please. We're heading for Palmerston North."

Poor Bob sat in helpless misery while the petrol gurgled in. Presently the hose clicked off and the attendant returned the nozzle to its hook.

"You were low. That'll be fifty-two eighty-five."

"Good. You got cigarettes?" Cy followed the young man into the office.

Bob heard raised voices—a scuffle—a shot—another shot—something heavy falling on the floor—a muffled crash—silence.

Cy came out carrying a carton of cigarettes and stuffing notes into his pockets. On his way to the car a thought must have struck him. He went back to the office and soon the place was in darkness. He climbed into the car grinning broadly. "We don't want to attract attention, do we. Now get moving Bob, there's a good fellow."

Bob was paralysed with horror but somehow his limbs moved automatically and the car moved off.

"You shot him. Why?"

"Yes, it was unpleasant—I wouldn't have had it happen for the world—I'd taken quite a liking to him, so friendly and helpful. But he wouldn't give me any cigarettes and he wanted to bash me with an old back axle."

"But why . . . ?"

"Well I didn't have any money for the gas, you see."

"But I would have paid for it, naturally."

"Oh, I wouldn't ask you for money, Bob, not after you've been so pleasant and cooperative. No, I couldn't sink as low as that. I wouldn't want you to think me ungrateful." He gave Bob a friendly pat on the thigh. Bob groaned.

"Put your knife away, George, and have a smoke." He tossed the big man a pack of cigarettes. George pocketed his knife and settled in the corner behind Cy.

Bob drove on, numb and sick with fear and helplessness. After a while he began to slow the car.

"What's it now, Bob?" he asked with just a hint of exasperation.

"It's no use, Cy," Bob was close to tears, "I can't go on with this any more. My heart's not in it. There's a rope in the boot—you can tie me to a tree and I'll take a chance on being found in the morning. You can drive the car yourself. Be simpler for you."

"Sounds like a good idea," said George.

"No, it's not a good idea. We can't possibly leave old Bob in the

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forest to die of exposure—it wouldn't be friendly. Now do speed up a bit—I'm sure you can manage eighty." Bob felt the gun in his ribs and moaned softly.

"Now cheer up old fellow, it's going to be very pleasant. As soon as we are through Taupo and past any roadblocks, we'll stop for a nice cup of tea. I see your wife's packed a basket for you."

The thought of roadblocks cheered the old man a little. "What if there are roadblocks?"

"Why then we'll be relying on you to talk us through, won't we?"

"What if I can't?"

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that but if it does, we have a hostage, haven't we? So you see why we can't let you go."

Bob saw. He was in a cleft stick. The Wairakei junction was looming up; there was no sign of a roadblock. Reluctantly he turned right and headed for Taupo. He pictured the little town, quiet at this time of the evening. He would be through it in five minutes and heading up the Napier road. What if he swung into Storey Place and came to a screaming halt in front of the police station? No. A policeman would come running out and Cy would shoot him while George put a knife through Bob's neck. Then Cy would take the car and there would be a chase and others would get killed. It was no use. They would keep him alive until they were close to Napier, and then he, Bob Sutherland, being expendable, would be expended. Cy wouldn't have it happen for the world, but Bob could see, couldn't he?

Bob could see all right. For the first time since he had fallen into the villains' hands he could see clearly. His thoughts turned to Megan, not two miles away, and to Myra in Orewa, waiting anxiously to hear from him. He remembered her last words to him—remember Jack.

He was thinking of Jack while he slowed the car to cross the control-gates bridge. Jack's seat belt had saved his life. Bob's belt was firmly in place. Cy's belt still hung on its hook, as did George's, whose eighteen horrible stone lolled in the seat behind Cy. They turned into Tongariro Street and Bob started to speed up a bit. They must have been doing nearly seventy when they got to Horomatangi Street. Just a slight twist of the wheel and the car mounted the curb and hit the concrete power pole outside the AA office square on, passengers' side . . .

An hour later Bob was on the phone to his wife who was only concerned about Megan. "I haven't seen her yet—she's asleep.

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They say she's okay. Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Now listen dear, I'm not at the hospital, I'm in it. . . . Just some nasty bruises and maybe a few cracked bones and some shock I guess . . . What happened? You won't believe me. I hit a power pole right in the main street of Taupo—must have dozed off. . . . What? . . . Yes, I know you told me to remember Jack and believe me that's exactly what I did. Now listen love, Megan had an accident on the mountain—an out of control skier crashed into her and broke her leg in two places. It's been set and now she's been sedated and is sleeping it off. And they are waiting to take me to X-ray and then I shall be very glad to sleep my little troubles off, too. We are in very good hands here so you be a very good girl and stop worrying. We'll both phone you tomorrow morning."

The gurney was wheeled off. The doctor turned to a policeman who was sitting there watching. "He'll be okay. Nothing serious. He had a lot more luck than the other two."

"Do you think it was luck? I think he is a very brave man. I wonder who Jack is, and where he comes into the picture?"

Solution to the May "UNSOLVED"

As related by Doris Krasny from Panama, Carl Igelhof from Uruguay drugged the lemonade and, accompanied by Flora Jackson from Russia, left the other athletes stranded on the mountain.

NAME	COUNTRY	SPORT
Adam Larson	Spain	diving
Brad Hawkins	Queensland	100–yard dash
Carl Igelhof	Uruguay	archery
Doris Krasny	Panama	gymnastics
Elena Granger	Taiwan	high jump
Flora Jackson	Russia	swimming

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UNDER THE WHIP

JOHN F. DOBBYN

"Billy" is a great name for a kid of six. When you reach twenty-six, and you top off at five foot three, and nobody is inclined to drop the *y*, the cuteness pales. And if you come out of the Irish bastion of South Boston, where six-footers are runts of the litter, you feel as if you could disappear in a crack in the sidewalk and nobody'd be the wiser.

On the other hand, you get a lemon, you make lemonade. I became a jockey. In fact, in that profession, I was among the tallest. Bone skinny, but tall. As they say, in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

I actually had good racing luck right from the start. They call a first-year jockey an "apprentice" and give him the advantage of having any horse he rides carry five pounds less than horses with regular jockeys. It can mean three or four lengths over the course of a mile. That attracts good mounts from trainers who might not otherwise consider an apprentice.

But the trick is to win enough races while you have the apprentice "bug" to get steady mounts from the trainers when the year is up. I was lucky enough to bring home thirty-five winners and about that many seconds and thirds that year. By that time, I was riding good horses from three stables during the long meet at Suffolk Downs in Revere.

Life was good. I had spills, but no disabling injuries. The money was coming in on a steady basis, and the Lord knows we needed it. I still lived in Southie with my mother and dad, Annie and Tim O'Casey, a pair of Irish sweethearts from back in grammar school days. On Beacon Hill, they'd have looked like a couple of shamrocks in a peony patch, but in dear old Southie, they blended.

They raised the two of us on a policeman's salary until a drug dealer's bullet in the Dorchester section of Boston took away the use of my dad's legs. My sister, Kathleen, picked up a job as secretary to the local state representative, needless to say Democratic. Between the two of us, we kept a good beef stew on the table.

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Ron Chironna

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Then on the fifth of July, the day after my twenty-sixth birthday, during my third year as a jockey, I climbed aboard Dusty Sam for the fifth race at Suffolk. Sam was a four-year-old gelding with good prospects. One of the stables I rode for had picked him up at a claiming race in New York. He'd been run into the ground, so the trainer gave him a four-week rest. This was his first outing at Suffolk.

The trainer gave me the same instructions I'd heard on an average of twenty or thirty times a year.

"This is just a tightener. We're not going for the win. Set him about fifth and just breeze him around the track. I just want him to run with other horses before we push him."

No big deal. Trainers do it all the time. It's understood.

Dusty Sam broke well, around fourth. I tucked him into the rail, and we just cruised. When we hit the far turn before the home stretch, the thoroughbred in his blood came out. He flattened his neck and went after the leaders. I had to use a seesaw motion on the bit to pull him back into fifth position. I hung him there until we crossed the wire.

The trainer was happy. In fact, the next time out, Dusty Sam won a twenty-thousand-dollar stakes race by two lengths. Unfortunately, I wasn't aboard that trip. On the sixth of July, I got a summons from the racing commission. The hearing lasted fifteen minutes. Within another fifteen minutes, I got the word that two of the three commissioners who sat on my hearing voted to revoke my jockey's license for "fixing a race."

About a week later, I was following what had become my morning routine of checking the help-wanted ads in the *Boston Globe* over breakfast. As usual, I turned automatically to scan the obituaries. It's an old South Boston habit passed down through generations. They used to call the obits the "Irish sports section." I'm not sure if that particular ethnic preoccupation with death is a result of deep faith in the Lord's promise for the next life, or the state of Irish cooking in this life.

In any event, there in the middle of the names beginning with O was one Patrick O'Flaherty. He was a distant cousin, as were most of the neighborhood if you went back far enough. I knew two things. My mother would be out the door within half an hour with a corned beef and the trimmings for the Widow O'Flaherty, and she'd have Kate and me at the wake that night. My father, of course, was excused. His disability was not totally without its rewards.

In the old days, "wake" was Gaelic for one hummer of a party. The women did whatever the women did to uphold the dignity of the occasion, while the men imbibed fine Irish whiskey, and the

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beer flowed like Shannon Falls. Cigar smoke filled the room until you couldn't recognize the guest of honor in the casket if you stood next to him.

But these days, it's all black suits and whisperings about how "grand" the deceased looks.

Kate and I made the usual round of condolences, and each settled in with a clutch of our own friends to wait for Father Mulcahy to say the Rosary.

There was another clutch in the far corner, and not a soul in the house was unaware of their presence. They were three well-stuffed suits, the retinue—to dignify the ominous trio—of one Matthew Boylan. We had our politicians, our councilmen, our state reps, and our congressmen in Southie; but the word was that there wasn't one of them who could pull six votes for dogcatcher without the nod of Matthew Boylan.

The unspoken question hovering over the room was, what brought Boylan's band of merry men to O'Flaherty's wake. Whatever the attraction was, we assumed that himself would have been there in person but for the inconvenience of being in jail awaiting trial for murder.

I was approaching the punch line of a story with my back to the three stooges, when I realized that no one was listening. In fact, my little audience seemed to be dropping their jaws in sync. I could just follow their eyes to know that Larry, Curly, and Moe were coming up behind me. By the time I turned around, I had Larry and Curly on each side, and I was looking up at the concrete block jaw of Moe.

My friends were riveted like bobble-heads, and the electricity in my spine was more than curiosity.

Moe cracked his concrete jaw in what passed for a benign smile. He broke the frozen silence.

"You the jockey? O'Casey?"

"Once upon a time. Why?"

"Mr. Boylan wants to see you."

"I repeat. Why?"

He just shrugged.

"When?"

"Now's a good time."

I looked at my friends for support and solidarity. Their lower jaws were at half-mast, and their eyes were like silver dollars. So much for support and solidarity.

When life offers you one choice, there's no point in wasting time with decisions.

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"Let's go, Moe. You drive."

The lockup was clearly locked down for the night. And yet at the mention of the name of the one I came to see, electric doors rolled open.

I was escorted to a neatly appointed room next to the warden's office. Mr. Boylan, seated comfortably behind eight inches of cigar, could have passed for Winston Churchill in denims.

"Billy O'Casey. I watched you ride dozens of times. You put money in my pocket."

"Gosh. You made my day."

It was out before I could stop it. The instant look in his cold mackerel eyes told me he was going to squash me like a bug. Then he rocked back and laughed till he choked on cigar smoke.

"Kid, you got guts. I'm told you got brains to go with it. And you're a jockey. That's why I need you."

"You want me to ride a horse? I lost my license."

"I haven't got a horse. What I've got is an indictment over my head for killing a jockey. You hear about that?"

"Word gets around. Manny Ippolito. He was a good kid. He rode clean. What's this got to do with me?"

"Did you know him?"

"Just in the jockeys' room. We weren't buddies."

"Don't you jockeys get to know each other? You ride against each other every day."

"Manny didn't speak English. He came up from some town outside of Rio de Janeiro. Like I said, what's this . . . ?"

"What it's got to do with you is I need someone to do some investigating. I need someone smart on the inside of the horse business. That would be you."

"Investigate what?"

"The murder. I was set up. I want to know who did it, and I want evidence that'll get me out of here."

I just smiled and shook my head. "You want a private investigator. That's the kind of thing you can't be without a license."

"Didn't you do some investigating in the service? Military police?"

"Minor stuff. You need years of real experience to get a license."

"We're off the point here, kid. The license is peanuts. I have a few friends down at the licensing bureau. You'll have your license an hour after you apply for it tomorrow. What do you want to know to get started?"

I thought, but only one question came to mind.

"Why should I do this in the first place?"

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He leaned back and sent a smoke ring slowly drifting in my direction.

"The reason for anything, Billy. Money. Your father's medical bills are still coming in. How long since Annie O'Casey's had a decent dress? I hear Kate might like to go to college."

He leaned forward to set the hook.

"Nobody who's done right by me has ever found me ungenerous. There'll be a thousand dollars under your front door tomorrow morning. That's just seed money. Like I said. What do you want to know to get started?"

Call me weak or anything else you'd like. Two things I knew. The thousand dollars was in an envelope under the door in the morning. The other thing was that I didn't like Matthew Boylan knowing my family by their first names.

I doled out some of the thousand dollars at breakfast to my dad and mom and Katie for the most pressing necessities. I could razzle-dazzle the questions of my mother and father with vague allusions to a new career opportunity. Katie, on the other hand, had a keen eye on baby brother. As soon as we were alone, she fixed me with the big sister look.

"C'mon, Billy. What are you into here?"

I decided to go with the unvarnished truth.

"Matthew Boylan hired me as a private detective to find the real killer and set him free."

"Very funny. You don't leave this room till I get the truth."

"I won five hundred dollars on a longshot at Suffolk."

She nodded in obvious relief. Sometimes the truth needs some varnishing.

The first step of my new career was to go to the licensing office and fill out the application for a private investigator's license. I handed the form back to the civil servant behind the counter and asked him when I'd hear about it. He flashed me the sardonic grin of the professionally cynical and said, "Sit down."

I sat.

In about three minutes, he reappeared and slid a paper across the counter. It took me another thirty seconds to realize that I was holding the license of a private investigator.

I must have had surprise on my face when I looked up at him and said, "Son of a gun."

He looked at me as if I were the winner of a fixed lottery and drawled a lethargic "Congratulations."

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My first official act in my new career was to find the office of the Suffolk County prosecuting attorney who was handling the Boylan case. I guessed that it was Frank Powers, the top assistant under the District Attorney. The D.A. himself was more of a hand-shaking climber than a lawyer.

Mr. Powers had the stamp of a longtime career prosecutor who gave the office whatever tone of professionalism it had through a succession of elected D.A.'s. He gave me a few minutes and, to my surprise, a certain amount of honest respect instead of the type of disgust or kissing-up that most people showed to retainees of Matthew Boylan.

"Thanks for seeing me, Mr. Powers. I wonder if you'd be willing to tell me what evidence you have against Boylan."

"Sure, Billy. Why not? You know who Rico Tomasso is?"

It was one of those names I could see in newsprint, but it could have been on the front page or in the sports section.

"Not really."

Mr. Powers closed the door. "He's a mid-level hood from Revere. He's not a made man, but he's working on it. We got him on two prior felonies involved with gambling. Now he's indicted for racketeering. That's three strikes. Could be the end of his illustrious career. He offered to trade us some information to bargain down to a misdemeanor. When he mentioned Matthew Boylan, we listened."

"Sounds like the kind of testimony juries like to ignore."

"Hear me out. Tomasso and Boylan have known each other for years. Not exactly buddies, but they know each other. Tomasso says that Boylan contacted him for the name of a reliable hit man. Tomasso gave him the name of Ray Gould out of East Boston. No specific job was mentioned, but Tomasso had Gould get in touch with Boylan. Three days later, the jockey, Ippolito, was gunned down in the Suffolk Downs parking lot after the last race."

"There's still no direct connection."

"Please. The next day, Ray Gould came to see Tomasso in that bar he works out of on Revere Beach, the Clamshell. Gould says he needs cash to get out of town. He did the job on the jockey and Boylan stiffed him on half the payment for the job. Tomasso gives him the money, and that's about the time we come down on him for racketeering. He's willing to make the trade."

"So you have the testimony of a three-time-losing mafia wannabe."

Mr. Powers grinned. "What are you doing? Arguing his plea bargain for him?"

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I grinned back. "Just getting a firm grip on the obvious."

"We also have Ray Gould. He didn't leave quite fast enough. He wants to make a deal too."

"That's one hood and a hit man." I raised my eyebrows and smiled. "Am I missing something?"

He leaned back in his squeaking chair with an enigmatic Spencer Tracy grin.

"Uh-huh. But I think we'll keep that hole card buried for the time being."

I picked up the marbles I'd won and got as far as the door. His voice sounded sincere when it stopped me.

"Billy O'Casey."

I turned around. He had a look I still can't fathom.

"Your father and I worked on a number of cases together. He was a good cop."

I knew that was code for the highest form of compliment. I smiled and nodded and started out again.

"Billy." I turned back.

"Is Boylan what you're really about?"

I shrugged. "Without a jockey's license. For the time being."

Frank Powers had me more off balance than I wanted to admit. I found myself on a direct path back to Boylan to get a sense of what I was really representing.

Boylan greeted my news of the two witnesses against him with a hearty laugh that was either disdainful or a fine acting performance. I'd have given a great deal to know which—and even more to be back on a horse.

"Don't you see, Billy? The Italians trumped it up to get the Irish on the front page and them off the heat. And how better to do that than to frame up Matthew Boylan?"

He grinned at me and put and arm on my shoulder. I failed to return either the grin or the arm.

"You hired me because you say I'm smart, Mr. Boylan. And now you treat me like an idiot. The Italian mob is crumbling from inside. They've got the Russians and who knows who else coming after their territory. They need a war with the Irish like they need boils. Could we assume for the moment that Mrs. O'Casey didn't raise a half-wit?"

The grin came off and he took the arm off my shoulder. He walked back to the chair and re-lit the cigar that was as natural an appendage to his face as his nose. He turned around, and I knew I was walking on the very edge. His look was enough to start the acid flowing in my stomach.

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"Don't get to be more trouble than you're worth, Little Billy."

I was frozen, but the moment passed and the grin came back.

"Alright, you're right. There's more to it. Tomasso had his reasons for wanting me put away. I dabble in a little gambling. I have a few boys who do some running for me, book a few bets this side of East Boston. I put out some feelers to see how far I can go. Tomasso thought I was cutting into his territory, which he considers to be the entire city. When that jockey got shot, Tomasso saw a chance to get me out of the way. And . . ." He held up his hands. "Here I am."

I listened, but I had no response.

"It's the truth, kid. Now get out of here and earn your keep. I hired you because you know your way around the track. Let's see a little action. My trial begins in two days."

I got as far as the door. I knew it could cost me the job, or maybe a kneecap, but I had to know the full tilt of the playing field.

"Mr. Boylan, what's your connection to Manny Ippolito? You can say you never met him, but I'll just have to ask it again. There's got to be some reason they wanted to tie you to that particular murder."

I watched him take a deep drag on the cigar. He was obviously weighing how far he could trust me.

"Alright, kid. One more inch, then no more questions. I had a chance to put a fix on the third race the day Ippolito got killed. I already had some of the jocks lined up. I heard Ippolito wouldn't go for it. I decided to back off. I figured there were other days. Other races. I called it off. I told him myself the fix was off."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I went down to the track. I saw him personally before the first race. I put it to him again, but I could see he wouldn't do it. So I called it off. We had a couple of words, but it blew over."

"You know, that's funny, Mr. Boylan. Manny and I haven't exchanged two words in the two years I've known him. He didn't speak English. He never picked it up."

"Yeah, I know. I brought that Mexican kid that works for me. He's good with the Spanish. He did the translating. Went smooth as silk."

It was about time for the seventh race when I got to the jockeys' room at Suffolk. Pete at the door shouldn't have let me in, but he did for old times' sake.

Jockeys tend to cluster in the groups they're most comfortable with. I passed my old locker with more than a pang of longing and came up to the cluster of Latino jockeys at the far end of the room. That was where Manny Ippolito tended to hang out. Most

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of them can speak English, but they talk to each other in Spanish.

Since I had yet to develop the cool moves of an investigator, I tried the only approach I could think of—direct. I asked if any of them knew if Manny had any serious enemies. I got a couple of headshakes, one muffled "no," and a whole lot of silence.

I phrased the question a few other ways, but it was clear I was not going to scale that particular wall.

The jockeys got the call for the seventh race. They all started out of the room and down the steps to the paddock area for last instructions and "jockeys up." The last one out was Hector Vasquez. He seemed to wait for me to catch up, and I took that as an invitation. I walked down the steps ahead of him, but I could hear his voice behind me.

"You're working the wrong side of the room, Billy."

I didn't turn around when I answered.

"How so?"

"It wasn't one of us. You should look up one of your own boys."

"Any one in particular."

"Joey DiSilva."

My stomach clutched into a knot. Joey was Italian, but he lived on the edge of Southie. We were friends since grammar school. In fact, we broke into racing as apprentices the same year. I'd had a crush on Joey's sister, Maria, since I stopped hating girls.

My voice was down to a raspy whisper. "What are you talking about?"

"Joey was heavy in debt. He got the gambling bug. He owed the guys you don't want to owe. That day Manny was killed, Joey heard from somewhere the third race was fixed. I think the mob put him onto it so he could get money to pay them. He bet everything he could get his hands on. He was going to sink or swim on that race. It turned out Manny Ippolito wouldn't go along with the fix. He rode to win. Joey lost big. You weren't here. Joey went crazy. Said he was going to kill Manny."

I couldn't speak until we were nearly at the entrance to the paddock.

As Hector passed me, he paused.

"You don't believe me, eh?"

My look must have said it all.

Hector just shrugged. "You're the one who asked."

Just before he entered the paddock, I got my voice back.

"Hector, who did he bet with?"

He hesitated. He didn't look around, but I could hear the words.

"There's a pawn shop on Harrison Avenue in the South End.

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Guy runs a book for people who don't want publicity. Al Chinois. Wear gloves if you shake hands with him."

"Hector, how do you know all this?"

He looked down. I could just barely hear the words.

"Joey's not the only one carries that monkey."

I treated myself to the displeasure of cruising up Harrison Avenue in the South End of Boston—not on any day to be confused with South Boston. Most of the South End was the Bowery of Boston until it became "trendy" and was reclaimed from the poor drunks who paved its sidewalks. That part of Harrison Avenue has not yet had the pleasure.

The pawnshop was the epitome of unreclaimed. I felt a wince in my soul at the thought of the human casualties who passed through that door. Al Chinois himself was perched like a bird of prey on a stool behind the counter. He looked my height and twice my weight. There wasn't a feature from his pinched little face to the attitude of his hunched-up body that didn't say "weasel"—not to malign the animal. He leaned forward on the counter, sucking on a cigarette, squinting at me through the smoke.

"Al, this is what you're going to look back on as your day."

The distrust in his eyes doubled.

I took out the envelope that had arrived under our door like manna from heaven that morning. It still contained five hundred dollars. I let the flap open to show the green.

"Payoff time, Al. Joey DiSilva sends his compliments and five bills."

He was off the stool and lunging. I snatched it back when his weasely little fist was three inches from paydirt.

"But first, Al, let's you and me get close."

He looked like I'd just taken away his pablum.

"Don't have an attack, Al. You'll get it. Maybe. First I need some information."

"What do you want?"

His fist stayed on the counter in case the envelope reappeared.

"How much does Joey owe?"

He was starting to sweat.

"A hell of a lot more than you've got there."

"In round figures."

"Twenty grand after that last one. I had to lay his bets off in town. I figured he'd come up with some cash after he bought that gun."

"What gun? When?"

"The day he bet the whole bundle. The day that jockey got killed."

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"What kind of gun?"

"Piece of work. Very unusual. S.A.M. 10 millimeter. They make 'em in the Philippines for troops. I haven't seen one in years. I gave him a good price."

"What you gave him was the key to hell. If he used it in a hold-up, there'd be a payback for you, right?"

Al gave a weasely shrug. "He's over twenty-one. How he pays off his debts is his business."

"You're a prince, Al. Mother Theresa, move over."

I was beginning to hate this job with a passion. There was no way I could avoid a face-to-face with Joey. I drove to the house and climbed the steps to the porch where we had talked about horses and racing, sometimes until it was time to go to the track for the morning workouts.

I hadn't seen Joey except in changing silks between races for a couple of months, and not at all since the day Manny was killed. I should never have gotten out of touch.

Maria answered the door, and I got the same weakness I used to get when I'd see her in high school. She gave me a hug, and I kissed her the way you kiss the sister of a good friend. I asked to see Joey, and something went tense.

"He's not here, Billy. He hasn't been home in a few weeks. I'm really worried. Have you seen him at the track?"

I had a hedgehog in the pit of my stomach that was growing.

"No. I haven't been riding for a while."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Billy. I heard."

"Well. One of those things. If you hear from Joey, would you ask him to call me at home?"

"Sure, Billy. I think he needs a good friend right now."

I left feeling lower than Al Chinois.

I was afraid to put the last piece in the puzzle, but I'd gone this far. I called Mr. Powers, the deputy D.A.

"Mr. Powers, I forgot to ask you one question."

"Shoot, Billy."

"I'm sure you've done the ballistics testing. What kind of gun killed Manny Ippolito?"

There was a pause on the other end.

"That's a piece of information we're not giving out to the public, Billy."

"Then let me guess. Tell me it wasn't an S.A.M. 10 millimeter."

There was another pause. The final trapdoor in my stomach fell

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when he said, "How did you know that, Billy? Did Boylan tell you?"

It was my turn to pause while I restructured a game plan.

"I've got to see you this afternoon, Mr. Powers. I'll be there in about an hour."

I went straight back to the track. I got there just after the last jockey had showered and left. Pete was straightening up. I hated to betray his trust too, but so far in this job I'd gone from a skunk to a rat. What was one more descent?

I told Pete I needed to get into Joey's locker to get something for him. Pete knew we were friends and never doubted me. That made it feel worse.

At first, I was relieved to see nothing out of the ordinary. Then I saw a cloth bag on the floor under a pair of shoes. I opened it just enough to see the gun inside, and I died a little more.

I was numb from the beating my conscience was giving me after I turned the gun and the information I'd gathered over to Mr. Powers. Within a day, he had matched the fingerprints on the gun to those of Joey.

Boylan's trial had just begun, but with the new evidence, the prosecutor, Mr. Powers, had the indictment against Boylan dismissed. An arrest warrant was issued for Joey.

The next day, there was an envelope under the door at home, just like the first one, except this one contained ten thousand dollars. I carried it around in my pocket for three days. It felt like thirty pieces of silver, a feeling that was confirmed when I got a call from Maria the day after the warrant for Joey was issued. She told me not to wait for any call from Joey and specifically left the name "Judas" ringing in my every waking thought.

Two days later I was in a bar in Southie soaking up ineffective liquid consolation and wrestling with a vague knot. It had merely jangled me before, but now it was rattling my cage. Suddenly, in the middle of a Jameson's and soda, the knot came unraveled.

I was in Boylan's office in twenty minutes. He flashed a grin and offered a hand. I just threw the envelope of money on his desk in front of him.

"You told Manny Ippolito the fix was off, did you? The day he was killed, right?"

He looked a little stunned.

"Yeah."

"Did it through the Mexican interpreter, right?"

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"Yeah. What the hell . . . ?"

"That would be some trick. I told you Manny was from Rio. That's Brazil. They speak Portuguese, not Spanish. That's why Manny didn't talk to the other jockeys."

He just looked at me.

"You never called off the fix, did you? Manny won the race because he wouldn't play ball with you. That's why you had him killed."

Boylan leaned back and fingered his cigar. It took him about three seconds to wind up on top again.

"You know, Billy. I was going to let you bask in the glory of setting an innocent man free. But you have to be a wiseguy. So now I've got to suck you in all the way. That's right. I had him killed."

It was my turn to be stunned by the barefaced admission.

"You're right. The little punk wouldn't fix. Worse than that, he went to the Commission. My boys on the Commission got word to me that the kid was dangerous. I couldn't have that. I went to Tomasso for a reliable man. He set me up with Ray Gould. That's how it happened?"

I recovered enough to ask, "So how did the police find out?"

"Like I told you, Tomasso double-crossed me. He needed a ticket out of a third-time felony conviction. Besides that, it was business. He trades with the D.A., and he gets me out of his gambling territory. I'd have done the same."

He managed to save the best shot for last.

"Now I'm off the hook, kid. Permanently. They dismissed the indictment. They can't try me again. Double jeopardy. But they can try you for defrauding the court in a murder case. That could be life."

"I didn't defraud anyone."

"Really, hotshot. Ace private eye. Listen, kid. All you really did was follow a trail I laid out ahead of you. Hector Vasquez, Al Chinois, they're in my pocket. They told you what I told them to tell you. Even old Pete in the jockeys' locker room. He let you into the jockeys' room on my say-so. I knew you'd get around to checking his locker, so I told Pete to open it for you."

The acid in my stomach could have run a car battery.

"How did Joey get into this?"

"Joey was a perfect setup. He was over his ears in debt to the bookies. Chinois was his bookie, and Chinois works for me. The day Ippolito was killed, someone tipped Joey off to the fix in the third race. He ran down to Chinois to bet everything he could get his hands on. When Ippolito blew the fix and won the race, Joey went nuts. He went down to Chinois to plead for more time. Chinois

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called me to see what to do. Twenty thousand is out of his league. I got the idea to get some insurance. I had Chinois show Joey the gun like he wanted to sell it to him. That way his prints were on the gun, and he had a motive. I had Gould use that gun to kill Ippolito without spoiling the prints on the handle. Old Pete planted the gun in Joey's locker. We laid out a trail that I knew would bring you to it."

"Then why did you need me?"

"I needed someone above suspicion with an 'in' with the jockeys to put it together and bring it to the D.A., which you did. Otherwise it would have looked like a setup."

"Which it was."

"You said it, kid. And you made it work. You get cute now, and they'll all swear that you were part of the fraud."

I had the gagging sensation of knowing that I was powerless. I had no proof of anything to take to the D.A. that would link Boylan to the fraud. He let me stew for a minute before showing me what the future held. He came around the desk for this one.

"And now, Billy Boy, I think we can agree that you're mine. You're in my pocket, lock, stock, and barrel. Since we agree on that, I got another job for you. More in your line of work. I want you to ride a horse for me at Suffolk this Friday."

That snapped me back to reality.

"Really. They let unlicensed jockeys ride on Fridays?"

He laughed.

"You still don't get it. I've got a few boys in the licensing commission in my hip pocket. You'll appeal the revocation tomorrow. The next day you'll be a jockey again. I had your license revoked in the first place. I can have it restored. I'll handle that part. You handle the horse."

"I thought you didn't own a horse."

"I don't. Your riding for a friend of mine. Only not to win. Let's be clear about this. This is not a tightener. I want this race fixed with no slips."

He was back in his chair, licking a new cigar to light up.

"This is the way of the world, kid. You can learn something. I put the deal together for this race with Tomasso."

He grinned at the startled look on my face.

"That's right, kid. Tomasso. Wake up to the world. It's all business. The past is the past when there's money to be made. It's a trade. He lets me buy into a piece of the action because I've got something he can use."

"Like what?"

"You, kid. And that other bunch of horse monkeys you ride

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with. I can fix races so they stay fixed. Ippolito was a lesson to them. It's like a well-oiled machine. Tomasso and his boys will make enough on that race on Friday to buy my way into the action. And when I make, you make. You can support Annie and Tim and Kate O'Casey like they never dreamed. You listening?"

I was listening. Practically brain dead, but listening. Then he stood up, full height. He towered over me for all the effect it could have.

"I want assurance of what team you're on, Billy. This is for keeps."

I gave him the sign that he'd understand best. I picked up the envelope of money, put it in my pocket, and walked away.

As predicted, I had my jockey's license back in two days. I even landed a couple of mounts through the week to get back in condition. For those precious minutes of intense speed during those races, my mind was relieved of the weight of thinking of Joey and Maria and what they were going through.

On Thursday night, I called Maria around midnight. She hung up, and I called right back.

"I suppose you want Joey to turn himself in so you can be more of a hero."

"Maria. Just listen to one thing. Tell Joey to stay where he is. Tell him not to show his face until after tomorrow."

She seemed surprised.

"Why not? What's happening, Billy?"

"I can't promise anything, Maria. Just give me till after tomorrow."

Post time for the fixed fourth race was four o'clock. I was nervous as a cat all day, and when I walked into the jockeys' room, you could cut the frost with a knife. The other jockeys looked at me like I'd sold myself into slavery. It didn't help that they wore the same chains.

I reported to the paddock for the owner's instructions. They were simple. "You know what to do. Do it, or you're a dead man."

I took the hand for "riders up." I could tell when we cantered through the warm-up that I had a lot of horse under me. In a straight race, he would probably be a contender.

I looked up into the stands. Above the winner's circle I could see Tomasso in his private box flanked by four or five no-neck sides of beef. Grinning and chatting beside him was his newest business partner, Matthew Boylan. A very large sum of money would flow into both of their pockets when the longshot, Branded, crossed the finish line.

Branded loaded into the fourth slot of the starting gate. I walked

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my horse, Wings of the Dove, up to the hands of the starters who led him into the outside eighth position. The starting gate for the mile race was directly in front of the stands. Before I pulled down the goggles, I caught one last look at the grins on the faces of the two new partners in crime.

I grabbed a fistful of mane, and the gate sprung.

My horse burst like a cannon ahead of the pack. I kept him on the outside of the track to let five horses, including Branded, pull past before easing him inside to the rail. We took the first turn with Branded on top and the next five of us strung out behind. We were all heavy on the bit to let Branded open up a couple of safe lengths. There wasn't one of us that couldn't have run him into the dirt in a fair race.

We cruised the backstretch in that order and came to the top of the far turn.

Before the race, my mind had been stretched six different ways. But now there was no doubt. Flying at a speed like a new dimension, completely at one with the heart and honesty of that single-minded thoroughbred, it was all clear.

I went to the whip at the top of the turn. Two quick smacks on the rump, and Wings burst into a new gear as if he welcomed it. I swung him wide, away from the rail, to be sure of open track. He knew what I was doing. He flew faster over the more solid surface in the middle of the track. In spite of having to cover more ground than the horses on the rail, his ears came back, and he ate up the lead of the next two horses at a rate I couldn't believe. We were into the stretch and still gaining on the three front-runners.

One of the jockeys we passed yelled something. The second and third horses were neck-and-neck ahead of me. Hector Vasquez was on the horse on the outside. He turned around and saw me coming. He knew what was up. He swerved his horse to the outside ahead of me. I had no choice but to cut left and drive Wings into the gap between him and the horse on the inside.

When he had me between them, Hector pulled hard to the left and squeezed me between the two horses. The head of his horse was pressing hard on the neck of Wings. If I let Wings break pace, I knew he'd never regain it.

In one instant that was hidden from the view of the stewards, I switched the whip to my right hand and rammed it front-end first so hard into Hector's rump that it sent him sprawling onto the neck of his horse. His horse shied to the outside. Wings saw daylight and drove into the open space.

For the last eighth of a mile, I flattened myself on Wings's neck

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and talked to him. I had no more need of the whip. He knew. I could feel those muscles convert energy to speed.

When we crossed the finish line three lengths ahead of Branded, I stood straight up in the stirrups. He never slackened the pace for another quarter of a mile.

I turned him around and galloped back to the winner's circle. I looked up to the box to see Tomasso and Boylan. There were no grins now. Tomasso was screaming something at Boylan above the crowd noise. Tomasso nodded to two of the sides of beef behind him. Boylan was while as a sheet. The cigar fell out of his mouth when the two beefcakes lifted him out of the seat and headed for the door in the back of the box.

Before they reached the door, another group of men burst into the box and pulled Boylan out of their hands. They flashed badges, and the beefcakes backed off. I could tell by the suits that they were government agents, probably FBI. I had called Mr. Powers the day before to set things up, just in case it worked out that way.

The government suits hustled Boylan out the door. No one could have been more eager to join them than Boylan. The plan was to offer him the witness protection program as an alternative to an introduction to the mackerel of Boston Harbor at the hands of Tomasso. It all turned on how satisfied the feds were with Boylan's ratting out his mafia connections as well as the corrupt judges, police, commissioners, and whoever else he had "in his hip pocket."

Apparently they were satisfied. He started with the truth about who killed Manny Ippolito. The warrant for Joey's arrest was quashed.

Boylan disappeared for a year until he began testifying in a string of federal prosecutions. His first testimony was against Tomasso.

The night after the race, I paid the last call I ever hope to make in a lifetime on Al Chinois. I used some of the cash from Boylan to settle accounts for Joey. Chinois showed more brains than I gave him credit for in cutting the debt to the bone in exchange for what I agreed not to say to the police. Whatever Boylan chose to tell the police about Chinois was between them. At least Joey was free to come back into circulation. He was riding again by the end of the week.

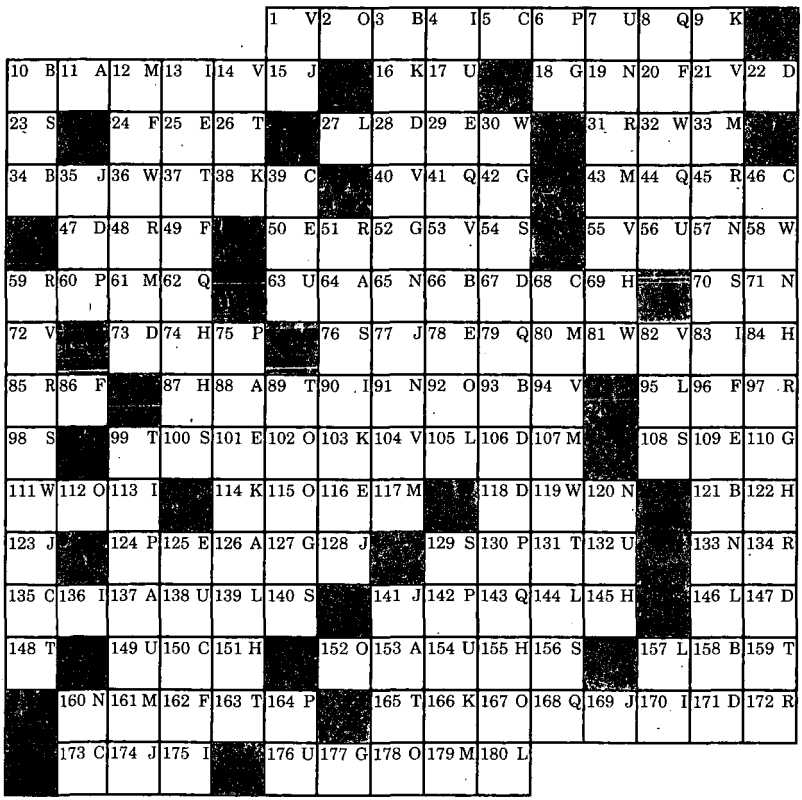
My life as a jockey was back on track, so to speak. Those two weeks as a private investigator still rank among the worst in my life. On the other hand, every time I think of ripping up my P.I. license, I remember that in that time, I took in eleven thousand dollars. Not bad for an apprentice.

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DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC PUZZLE BY ARLENE FISHER

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the righthand column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken. The solution will appear in the July/August issue.



DEFINITIONS

A. Poirot contemporary

B. Joe Namath's alma mater

WORDS

A. ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
88 64 153 11 137 126

B. ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
93 66 158 121 10 34 3

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DEFINITIONS		WORDS
C.	Wagon-train whip	135 173 68 46 150 5 39
D.	Navigational aid: 2 wds.	147 67 106 118 47 22 73 171 28
E.	Hammerstein hit	29 116 125 101 25 109 50 78
F.	Soda capacities	86 162 24 96 20 49
G.	Illusion, in a way: 2 wds.	42 127 52 18 110 177
H.	One-time mercenaries	74 69 155 151 122 87 84 145
I.	"Winesburg, Ohio" author	136 170 175 13 90 113 83 4
J.	Forming undulations	77 169 141 128 15 35 174 123
K.	Bores	103 166 16 114 38 9
L.	Incidental words	27 144 139 95 105 157 146 180
M.	Baseball labor-talks side	61 33 179 117 161 107 43 80 12
N.	*Gelato* kin: 2 wds.	91 19 120 160 65 57 71 133
O.	Cohesive element	112 115 178 92 2 152 167 102
P.	Parabola kin	130 6 142 60 164 124 75
Q.	Quaint domestic task	79 143 8 62 44 41 168
R.	Lacoste emblem	85 172 31 48 45 51 59 134 97
S.	Middle East events, more than likely	108 156 129 23 70 98 54 76 100 140
T.	Business concern, perhaps: 2 wds.	37 131 89 163 159 99 165 148 26
U.	Breakfast side: 2 wds.	149 154 63 7 176 56 138 132 17
V.	Not quite rare	21 55 1 40 72 82 53 94 14 104
W.	Courtney Love or Dolly Parton	81 32 30 119 111 58 36

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DEATH BY DONUTS

ELAINE STIRLING

Edith Kretschke worked the night shift at Snowball Gas Bar and Donuts. She'd been working there since 1963, when her husband Jake plowed his reconditioned Harley into the side of Rayburn Mountain, leaving her with three small children and a widowed mother-in-law. Mrs. Kretschke, the mother-in-law, was long since gone and the kids grown, living their own lives, but Edith continued to walk half a mile down the highway five nights a week at ten thirty P.M. to cover the night shift at Snowball Gas Bar and Donuts.

There was an order to the world between the hours of eleven P.M. and seven A.M., and a feeling that Edith couldn't quite explain—like she was getting away with something, staying up all night, chatting with folks her own dead parents would have disapproved of. Now that she was getting closer to Social Security, the thrill of meeting rebels had mostly worn off, and she no longer worked weekends. But she still enjoyed that sense of order, of knowing for eight hours exactly what needed to be done and when, and being able to put it all behind you when the day shift came in.

Abel Hansen, the owner of Snowball Gas Bar and Donuts, worked the gas bar. At least he used to when the pumps were full serve and you got an oil check and clean windshields with every fill-up. Now he just put in occasional appearances to check the till, sneak a coffee and Boston creme against doctor's orders, and to ogle the part-time help.

"Where's your headset, Edith?" were the first words out of his mouth that night.

"It's around here somewhere." Edith was dumping yesterday's unsold donuts into black plastic garbage bags. Buster Yates would be coming by soon to pick them up for bear bait. Wasn't anything

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drew a bear better than the smell of day-old grease and sugar.

"How many times have I told you, you have to wear the headset. This is a drive-thru facility, you know."

"Ain't no one drivin' through, far as I can tell."

"How would you know if you're not wearing the headset?"

Edith removed half a tray of raspberry twirl donuts from the bottom rack, set them on the counter, and pressed both hands to her lower back. "See that window over there, Abe? Do you see any headlights coming this way?"

Abel Hansen had to admit that he didn't. But neither, he said, did Edith have eyes in the back of her head. If she didn't start wearing her headset, he'd have to . . . well, he'd have to . . .

"What'll you have to do, Abe, fire me?"

"I'll make you work weekends."

"I'll quit."

"I'll send you on a training course."

"I'll double quit."

Abel Hansen's shoulders sagged. "Just this once, Edith, why don't you give me a break?"

"Why, sure, Abe, I can do that." She dumped the raspberry twirls into the bag. "Soon as I finish with these day-olds."

Her boss, sighing, went to the cash register, pressed the NO SALE button, and opened the till. He flipped a thumb through the meager piles of ones, fives, and tens. Then he looked around. "Where's the new girl?"

"Fixing her face, I expect. I never seen anyone so attached to the sight of herself. She even uses the chrome on these display cases, like if she doesn't check every few minutes, her face'll melt or something."

"The first solitary came in at 2:17 A.M. I know because I like to see what time it starts."

"Now, now, she's just a young thing." Abel Hansen stepped back around the alcove and spit-flattened his thinning gray hair, then stepped out again. Edith didn't let on that she had seen him in the reflection of the plate-glass mirror.

"Hi, Mr. Hansen." The new girl, whose name was Sherri with an *i*, came out from the back room wearing enough strawberry lip gloss to choke a horse. She was also, to Abel's delight, wearing her headset. "I was reorganizing the freezer," she said, taking a passing peek into the chrome.

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Sure you were, Edith thought, and I was out here dancing a jig. She filled the last of the plastic bags, secured it with a twist tie, and sat down to squash the donuts.

"That's good to hear," Abel Hansen said. "I like to see initiative in my gir—employees."

"Thank you, Mr. Hansen."

"How are you liking the new job?"

"I like it just fine."

"Edith treatin' you okay?"

"Oh, sure, she's a lot of fun." Sherri picked up a dishcloth and sauntered to the tables that were, at the moment, devoid of customers and spotlessly clean. Abel watched her wipe the faux marble table tops as if she were performing a feat of true brilliance. "We're mighty pleased with your work so far, Sherri. Keep it up, and you'll go places."

She gave him her broadest strawberry grin. "Why, thank you, Mr. Hansen."

Edith rolled her eyes as she dragged the thirty-pound sack of bear bait to the back. Where did Sherri think she was going in Snowball, for heaven's sake?

When she returned, Abel was demonstrating how to level off the cream cheese scoop so it looked full, when three sets of headlights turned into the drive-thru. Edith fished out her headset from beneath the cash and affixed it over her netted silver curls. If her boss hadn't been there, she'd have given her usual drive-thru greeting: "How's it goin'? What can I get ya?" Once they'd placed their order, she'd tell them about the daily special on pies and cakes. She usually managed to sell two or three a night. But she had promised to give Abel a break. And as he liked to point out, he had paid good money for the Performance Improvement Consultant who came to Snowball with a crateful of binders and training videos. Edith would only upset him if she talked normal.

"Welcome to Snowball Gas Bar and Donuts Drive-Thru," she said in a chirpy sing-song. "How can we be of service this evening?"

There are certain things a person gets to notice when they've worked the same job for a long, long time. Things like the way people will push a door a half dozen times when the door is clearly marked PULL. Or the way people take more napkins than they need for a donut and coffee and shove the excess in their purses. As if it's not stealing. As if they had a right to a handful of what-

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ever because they spent a whole $1.79. And then there had been the weird observations that Edith never talked about because there'd never been a reason. It was a private game, just between herself and her. She probably would have gone to her grave never having talked about them if Abel Hansen had not been found dead beneath the Super-Size Slurpee sign.

The night shift had begun like any other. Edith came in through the side door nearest the restrooms and greeted the three-to-eleven staff, all of whom were young enough to be her grandchildren. In the furnace room that doubled as a staff lounge (lounge, ha!), she exchanged a worn pair of Keds for an even better worn pair of white nursing shoes. She put on her hairnet, washed her hands in a big old rusty sink, and went out to the deep-fry room where Mitch McGillivary was proofing old fashioneds and crullers. She always enjoyed her chats with Mitch McGillivary. He'd been baking for Snowball Gas Bar and Donuts for seventeen years—nowhere near her own thirty-nine, but a veteran nonetheless.

"How are the bunions?" he asked.

"Not too bad tonight, thanks. How's the bursitis?"

"Flared up a bit when I was hunting this weekend. Could hardly lift the rifle. But seems okay now."

"Devil of a thing, this getting older, isn't it?"

Mitch laughed. "You got that right, Edie."

Most folks'll say that the hours between two A.M. and five A.M. are the worst on a night shift; they seem to go on forever. But they were the hours Edith enjoyed most. Between two and five, the state police would stop by for their complimentary java and jelly filleds, and Edith would get caught up on all kinds of gossip. Then there were the party goers—not your out-of-control weekend drunks, but the midweek bar crowd who had stayed for last call and weren't ready yet to call it a night. Smelling of beer and cigarette smoke, they would order the soup, sandwich, donut, and coffee meal for $7.99, pay with a twenty, and tell Edith to keep the change. She once earned $124.76 in tips on one shift alone.

Most every night there were the solitaries, a special kind of customer. Usually they came in alone, but they also appeared in groups of two or three, almost always between the hours of two A.M. and five. You could tell a solitary by the way he held his coffee cup, hunched over it, head bowed, keeping out the world. And if there were two or more who came in together, they moved as a unit, making no eye contact, wasting no words when they placed

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their order. "Medium, double double. Small decaf, just cream." Solitaries never smiled, never tipped, and seldom cleaned up after themselves. But that wasn't the weird thing about them.

Her shift with Sherri passed like any other with a visit from Abe, a nice flow of customers until the quiet hours, and a rush of commuters from five thirty to seven. Edith was home by seven forty, had tea and whole wheat toast for breakfast, and lay down for a few hours sleep. She was awakened two hours later by a knock on the door.

The nice-looking young man introduced himself as Detective Lawson with the Investigative Unit of the State Police. He wore an open gray trench coat, dark slacks, and a light blue button-down shirt. Edith couldn't make out much of his badge or introduction. She'd been sleeping like a sailor, amazed she heard the door. But she did catch the words, *homicide, Abel Hansen*. She grabbed the door frame to keep from falling over.

Detective Lawson helped her inside to the couch where she sank in a state of shock. He spoke to her kindly, offered to get her a glass of water.

"No thank you, I'll be fine. Just give me a minute." Abel Hansen dead. The words went through her head over and over. When the worst of it was passed, she asked the detective, "What happened?"

"A customer found him this morning near the pumps."

"Was he shot?" Edith asked, knowing how everyone packed a gun in Snowball.

"Clubbed to death. Coroner estimates he'd been dead for a few hours."

"So it happened on the night shift?"

"Looks that way, yes."

Detective Lawson began with the usual questions, the kind you heard on cop shows all the time. Did she speak with the deceased during her shift? Did she hear or notice anything out of the ordinary? Yes, Edith answered, she had spoken with him, and no, she hadn't heard or noticed anything. He asked her then how long she had been acquainted with the deceased.

"Oh, I've known Abe all his life. He was a local boy, used to come to my folks' house when he was a kid. We'd feed him and his brothers supper when their parents were out drinking their paychecks." Edith pulled a tissue from a nearby box and blew her nose. "Oh my God, I just c-can't believe that anyone—that this would . . ." Her words dissolved in an outburst of tears.

The detective offered sympathetic comments and gave her time to regather her composure. "I'm sorry," she said after a few minutes.

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"It's quite all right. Do you think you could still answer a few more questions?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"How long has Mr. Hansen been your employer?"

"Oh, that's a tough one, lemme think. Nineteen seventy-eight the old man died, then Abe's brother took over for a while until the franchise people came in. Abe bought the franchise in eighty-two, so he's been running the Gas Bar and Donuts for twenty years. I've been working there thirty-nine."

"That's an impressive work history, Mrs. Kretschke. Now tell me, do you know of anyone who might have had reason to harm him?"

Edith thought on this a moment. "Well, there are a few locals who wouldn't cross the street for Abe Hansen. He has an eye for the women and is—*was* a terrible tightwad—had to shame him into every raise I got. But put all his faults together, and I doubt you'd find enough cause to kill him. Flatten a couple of his tires, maybe."

Detective Lawson suppressed a grin. "Perhaps you could give me the names of some of these locals."

"I could," she said, and then an earlier question suddenly came back to her—the one about seeing or hearing anything out of the ordinary. She had answered truthfully because for her, those things weren't out of the ordinary; she saw them all the time. But maybe to a homicide detective, they would be important—no, if she told him, he'd think she was a nut.

"Mrs. Kretschke?"

She shuddered and blushed, like she'd been caught in a fib.

"Do you remember something?"

"No, well, maybe, I'm not sure." But yes, she was sure. That was the heck of it.

"I'd be happy to hear any ideas you might have."

"You would?" She looked around, thinking. "Do you think maybe we could go to the store? I think it'd be better if I was able to show you."

"Certainly, we could do that. Most of the evidence should be gathered by now."

Detective Lawson waited while Edith changed from a night-gown and bathrobe to sweater and jeans, then drove her in his white sedan the half mile to Snowball Gas Bar and Donuts. Tears filled her eyes when she saw the place, wrapped with yellow police tape and no customers coming in or out. There were a few police cars and a small crowd of locals gathered at the sidewalk.

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Of course the locals all gawked at her when she got out of the sedan with the detective and entered the donut shop. She waited at the counter while he spoke with two uniformed police officers and a woman in plain clothes.

"They've finished dusting for prints," he said when he returned. "But we'll still try not to touch anything unless we have to."

"I'll keep my hands to myself," Edith promised, "but could I make some coffee? I'll bet your team could use some."

"That would be nice," he said with a smile.

While Edith brewed a pot of Special Blend, she told the detective about Abel's nightly visit. "We had our usual argument about the headset, which I can't stand wearing 'cause it cuts off my hearing and affects my balance. I'm sixty-two years old, you know."

"You don't look anywhere near it," he said.

"Bless you." She set out the mugs and prepared a platter of assorted donuts. "We talked about this and that, and then he left around two A.M. That was the last time I saw him."

"Do you know where Mr. Hansen went after he left the shop?"

"No, but he usually goes straight home. He lives just down the street. Sometimes Abe comes back during the morning rush, around five thirty." Edith did some calculating on her fingers. "He must have come back earlier that night." Her eyes filled with tears again. "Poor man, he shouldn't have."

Edith served the investigating team coffee and donuts, then spoke in a lowered voice to the detective. "I've never told anyone what I'm going to tell you. You'll probably think I'm a couple bricks short . . ."

"Believe me, Mrs. Kretschke, very little surprises me in this job."

"Well, in that case . . ." She looked at the clock on the wall that now read 11:48. "The first solitary came in at 2:17 A.M. I know because I like to see what time it starts."

"Solitary?" the detective said, looking up from his notepad.

"It's a name I give to a certain kind of customer. You only get them on the night shift, or maybe it's just that they're more noticeable after dark."

"I see. You also mentioned something about starting."

"Yeah, it doesn't start until the first solitary comes in." She saw the detective's flat expression. "I don't have a word for it, but if you'll let me tell this in my own way, it might make sense to you."

"Sure, Mrs. Kretschke, go ahead."

"He was a young man, no more than twenty-two, twenty-three. He had dark hair, cut short, a thin face, and wore a gray U. of M. sweatshirt with frayed baggy jeans. He ordered a large black coffee

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and a sour cream glazed. As the first solitary of the evening, he wandered around, looking for a place to sit. He had his pick of eighteen tables, and it took him a while to choose. Finally, he went to the far window, three tables from the end, and took a seat facing the donut counter. He hunched over his coffee like it was keeping him warm, even though last night was warm for September.

"He ate his sour cream glazed, drank his coffee, never looked up once. Then he got up, left the plate and mug where they were, and went out the door. I cleaned up after him."

Edith waited for the detective to finish writing notes. When he looked up and nodded, she continued. "Eight minutes went by, and then two more solitaries came in. They ordered two regulars, a bagel with light cream cheese, and a cherry danish." She could tell from the detective's expression that he was impressed with her memory. She'd been playing this game with herself for so long, she didn't realize it was anything special.

Then he lifted a finger. "You mentioned two solitaries. Did they come in alone or together?"

"They were a couple. Solitaries don't have to be alone. They're just . . . separate from the rest of us."

"I get it. Please go on."

"Well, just like I knew they would, they went straight to the far window, three tables from the end. They dickered for a moment about which one would take the chair facing the counter. That's how it is with solitaries. Once the first one marks his territory, the others'll follow for the rest of the night as if it's a blazed trail. Doesn't matter whether ten minutes has gone by or an hour. They'll always sit at the very table of the solitaries who preceded them. And if there was only one who started it, they'll fight over the chair."

The detective was doing a fine job of listening, Edith thought. She was glad she'd decided to trust him. "Were you acquainted," he asked, "with any of these . . . solitaries?"

"Nope, they weren't from around here. Snowball folks have their special tables, but they come at civilized hours. Solitaries are most always from away."

"I see."

Edith led him to the third table from the end at the far window, being careful not to touch anything. "The second ones, the couple I was telling you about, were probably in their early thirties. They were headin' somewhere sad, maybe a funeral, with a long drive ahead of them.

"After they left, there was a gap of maybe twenty minutes. That

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would take us to what, a quarter past three or thereabouts." The detective wrote down the time. "That's when the two young men came in. One of them was wearing a black and red hunting jacket, like you see everywhere around here. His head was shaved, and he wore a gold earring. His buddy was just a little guy, all wired up and jittery. They ordered dark roast, jumbo size—needed the caffeine, I expect, though it's actually regular roast that has more caffeine. Bet you didn't know that, Detective."

He smiled. "You're right, I didn't, Mrs. Kretschke."

"So I give them their coffee, and of course, they head to this very same table, sitting in the same two seats as the couple who'd left twenty minutes before."

"Even though there's a choice of four seats."

"That's right."

When she didn't continue right away, the detective looked up. "What happened next?"

"They drank their coffee, kept to themselves. The little one used the men's room, and then they left. The next two didn't come in 'til after four o'clock, but like I said, the gap don't matter. Solitaries'll pick up the trail until it comes daylight, and then we get folks on their way to work. They're a different breed entirely."

"So what were these two like?"

"Two girls, late twenties, they looked beat. Probably just coming off some night shift themselves. They ordered coffees and a ten-pack of Ping Pongs—"

"Ping Pongs?"

"Donut holes."

"Of course."

"They paid for their order, turned around, and headed straight for this table. Then, not more than two steps from here, both of them stopped. Dead in their tracks, I tell you, just like they'd come to the edge of a cliff."

"Then what did they do?"

"They backed away. Without even lookin' at each other, they both decided in their own heads they couldn't sit at this table. They looked around for a few seconds, and then they left, without so much as a how-do-you-do."

The detective, who'd been following along so well, now scrunched his face in confusion. "What are you saying, Mrs. Kretschke?"

"What I'm saying is, the murderers had to be the two fellows before them. Something about the guy with the earring and his

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jittery sidekick spooked those two girls, even though they never laid eyes on them."

"You think so?"

" 'Course I think so, I saw it happen." She rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "You see, Detective, the way I figure, we humans are more animal than we let on to ourselves. We can smell people who feel the way we do, and we can smell danger. Those two girls smelled danger, and they bolted."

"Do you have any idea which way those two young men went?"

"No, but they didn't have a vehicle so unless they hitched a ride, they haven't gone far. There's only the highway and the woods around here, and the woods this time of year are crawling with bear hunters."

"How do you know they didn't have a vehicle?"

She pointed to the large plate-glass window. "There were no headlights."

Detective Lawson put away his notepad. "You're amazing, Mrs. Kretschke."

The state governor told her the same thing a few months later when she accepted the award for Civilian Excellence. If it hadn't been for her astute observations, he said at the dinner in her honor, they might never have caught the two men who were wanted in eight states for armed robbery and murder. "It's nothing," Edith Kretschke said in her acceptance speech. "Just comes from a long life of sellin' donuts."

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CHARLES B. CHILD

ALL THE BIRDS OF THE AIR

They found Hadji Hussain huddled on a chair in the summer room of his house on the banks of the Tigris. He had a bruise above the forehead and died from a brain hemorrhage shortly after they carried him out.

The room was actually a deep windowless cellar with a single entrance at the foot of an outside flight of steps. An air shaft led to the roof and trapped the river breezes, making the *surdab* a pleasant retreat from the excessive heat.

Inspector Chafik of the Criminal Investigations Department of the Baghdad police appreciated the coolness. Outside, the white light of noon glared on the tiles of the courtyard. The Inspector's shirt stuck to his thin body and disturbed him; he was fastidious about his clothes. Wiping his swarthy face with a handkerchief sprinkled with orange water, he announced, "I consider it unreasonable for people to die on such a hot day."

His assistant, a tall unemotional sergeant, understood why the Inspector was worried about Hussain's death. The Hadji, who was loved and venerated in Baghdad, was head of the courts where ecclesiastical matters such as divorce, questions of Moslem theology, and disputes concerning religious institutions were brought for settlement.

Recently the old man had handed down a decision that concerned a property willed to the Shafiite shrine at Zagros. He had favored the relatives who had brought a complaint of coercion against the shrine. In consequence, the Shafiites, a small but fanatic sect, had threatened reprisals, and a police guard had been placed at the Hadji's house.

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Tatjana Mal-Wyss

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This affected Sergeant Abdullah personally because the detail had been in his charge, so he began anxiously, "Permit me to report—"

Chafik said, "Later. I have not digested the medical report. It is always an unappetizing dish. They tell me the violence of the blow might have killed a younger man. The Hadji was old, frail. If he fell and struck something—"

"Sir, there is nothing to indicate it," said the sergeant. "And what was he doing in the chair?"

"It is possible that after the first impact of the blow he recovered sufficiently to find his feet and stumble to the chair. He may have retained consciousness until the clot formed."

The Inspector had strange dun-colored eyes, flat and expressionless except when he was worried. He looked around trying to visualize what had happened. The room was very simply furnished. There were a cot, a few chairs, straw mats on the tiled floor, a bedside lamp; near the lamp was an open copy of the Koran, which had been put down so hurriedly the edges of the pages were folded. A light blanket was flung back from the foot of the bed.

Chafik said, "There is the impression of a head on the pillow; the Hadji was reposed. And the position of the Koran, the blanket, tells us he was rudely disturbed. The interruption occurred shortly after he came to rest, otherwise he would not have been reading. The aged do not have to woo sleep."

He folded his slender hands and glanced at the sergeant, who knew what was expected and immediately began to quote from memorized notes, "Sir, the Hadji entered the *surdab* after the noon prayer. He was escorted by a retainer named Murad, who closed the door behind his master and then proceeded to other duties. Murad is the house watchman."

"Where were you stationed, Abdullah?"

"I was in the courtyard, sir, where I could observe all the people of the house. I now list them. First, there is Mr. Romani, the deceased's nephew, visiting from Amara—"

"A lawyer. I know of him," Chafik said.

"Then there is Mr. Sadir, a young man who lives here."

"His father died two months ago and was a close friend of the Hadji, who was appointed guardian to the youth. I find it strange," Chafik added, "that an adult should require a guardian, but there are rumors Sadir preferred Cairo to Baghdad. Life there is gay."

"A sinful city," said the sergeant.

"The mole," remarked Chafik, thinking of his own city of the

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dusty plains, "without a doubt calls the lark sinful. But continue."

"Sir, Mr. Sadir and Mr. Romani also retired because of the heat. Their rooms are on the second floor. The servants, too, were in their quarters. Only the watchman Murad remained active. He stood at the main gate within my view." The sergeant cleared his throat, then stood rigidly at attention and said without inflection, "It is now necessary to make confession—"

"You slept?"

"Because of the heat, I dozed, sir. Briefly, only a few minutes, but I deserve reprimand. When I opened my eyes I saw Murad running toward the *surdab.* I halted him. He said he had heard the door open and thought his master had called out. We both proceeded to the spot. The door was indeed open and we saw the Hadji collapsed on the chair. I sent Murad for Mr. Romani, who came at once. Over my protests, he carried his uncle to an upper room."

"It was unwise to move a dying man, but in this case, it probably made little difference. You searched the room after the Hadji was taken out?"

"Diligently. There was nothing that resembled a weapon here."

"And where was Mr. Sadir?"

"In his room, sir. He is a heavy sleeper and had to be roused."

The Inspector looked at the bare walls of the *surdab.* The only break in the smooth brickwork was the air shaft; it resembled a narrow chimney and ended about six feet above the floor in an open vent. Chafik could see a small square of sunlight far above. The twittering of many birds echoed down the shaft and reminded him that the old man had loved birds and given them sanctuary in his garden.

"This place may be cool," the Inspector said, "but I do not find it restful. The birds are noisy."

Sergeant Abdullah interrupted, "Now what a knucklehead I am! I forgot to tell you about the bird."

"A bird?"

"Dead, sir—"

"Here in the *surdab.* It lay on the Hadji's lap, in his hand. I have labeled it as an exhibit."

He produced a pathetic bundle of black and white feathers. The bird had a forked tail and rakish wings; there was a chick's down on the breast.

Chafik said, "A swift." He touched the dangling head. "The neck is broken, it has not been dead long. A lazy fledgling that refused to fly until it was pushed from the nest. Possibly it tumbled down

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the air shaft, a not uncommon occurrence. Or perhaps it fell against the door. The thud might have disturbed the Hadji, made him leave his cot and open the door—"

He stopped and gave Abdullah a sharp look; the sergeant's rare expressions were easy to read and Chafik said with sudden wrath, "So you think somebody was waiting outside the door?"

"Sir, it did enter my mind."

"Was this person invisible that he wasn't seen by the watchman at the gate? Was he foolhardy enough to stand there while you were briefly dozing a few yards away? What fiction have you been reading?"

As he left the room, the Inspector added indignantly, "Must everybody die murdered to please you, Abdullah?"

The house was a relic of old Baghdad. Rooms opened on an inner courtyard tiled with honey-colored brick. An archway led to a terrace that faced the river. There was a garden bright with flowers and shaded by ancient trees, all enclosed within a high wall.

Chafik joined two men who were waiting on the terrace. One was the Hadji's nephew, a middle-aged man with the sallow hungry look of a sufferer from a stomach ailment. Romani, who practiced law in the southern town of Amara, came to Baghdad several times a year to visit his uncle.

His companion was much younger, little more than a youth, and had a downy mustache. He looked bored. The cut of his clothes and the way he wore them gave Chafik a twinge of envy and he hoped that one day he, too, might visit a Cairo tailor. Reluctantly, he looked away from the dapper Sadir and waited for the older man to speak.

Romani asked, "Have you formed a conclusion?"

"I let facts form their own conclusions."

The Hadji's nephew nodded approval. "It is a definite fact," he said in his thin clear voice, "that my uncle was threatened. The Shafiites are a lawless people."

"In the past they have not stopped at assassination," the Inspector said.

"On the other hand," Romani said, "it is wrong to use the history of yesterday as evidence of violence done today."

Chafik made a little bow. "How justly you correct me! But I can say what I think about them because you alone took serious view of their threats. Your uncle did not."

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"In point of fact I agreed with him. But I advised him to ask for police protection as a precautionary measure, and when he refused, I took the step myself. Naturally."

Chafik thought he knew why Romani's law practice was small. The man was too cautious. He had a good reputation, always refused doubtful cases, but such legal ethics did not appeal to minds nurtured by the labyrinth of bazaars where business was conducted in Iraq.

The Inspector turned for relief to Sadir. "What did you think of the threats?" he asked the young man.

Sadir was polishing his manicured nails. He looked up languidly and said, "I am used to the civilized life in Egypt. I confess I paid little attention to this talk of threats and violence." He mopped his face with a handkerchief. "Such heat!" he complained.

"You miss Cairo?" Chafik asked.

Surprised and pleased that somebody should understand him, Sadir became confidential. "This place destroys me," he said. "There is no beauty here. Life is so crude, so lacking in urbanity—"

Romani interrupted, "Do not take our time with your foolish problems, Sadir. I know you wish to return to Cairo. It matters little to me personally, but the legal aspect of your case must be carefully considered. You were made my uncle's ward for two years. But we will discuss this later."

The young man flushed and moved away up the terrace. Romani shook his head and said sternly, "He has no sense of responsibility. Have you any more questions, Inspector?"

"I was going to ask if you entirely rule out the possibility of an intruder."

The Hadji's nephew looked down at the river, at a fisherman who stood in the shallows, his brown arm lifted to throw a weighted casting net. "I rule out nothing," he said finally. "But how could an intruder pass the police guard? Observe, for example, the height of the wall on the river side. The Tigris is at its lowest, there is a drop of thirty feet to where that fisherman stands. The door at the top of the steps that lead down the water is always locked."

Chafik interrupted, "What do you know about Murad, your uncle's watchman?"

"I believe he is able and trustworthy."

"He has a Kurdish name. The Shafiites are a Kurdish sect—"

Romani said, "I close my ears. What you say is slanderous, even defaming, and as a lawyer I advise you to be more cautious."

The Inspector permitted himself the thought that this man probably tested the temperature of his bath water before he put a

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toe in it. Venturing another question, he asked, "Did you know your uncle was nursing a dead bird when he was found?"

Romani was startled. "A dead bird? No."

"It may have fallen down the air shaft or against the door. Your uncle loved birds. Something disturbed him in the *surdab*. If it was the bird he would have jumped up to succor it, and then—"

"In his haste he slipped, struck something—"

"Conjecture," Chafik said, smiling at his mild triumph. "But you may be right." He stopped, almost deafened by a shrill outcry from the many birds perched on the roof. "How noisy they are!" the Inspector said.

"I do not share my uncle's affection for birds. He would not allow a single nest to be destroyed." The thin voice trailed and Chafik looked at the man curiously.

Meeting the Inspector's eyes, the lawyer explained, "I had a thought. I reprimanded you for an unjust suspicion; now I find I have one myself."

"Concerning whom?"

"Murad. On previous visits I noted his sober habits. He rarely left my uncle's side. But lately I have seen him in cafés frequented by people of his class. I thought it odd because he is careful with money."

"What do you suggest?"

"I suggest nothing. I merely present facts." The lawyer turned away as a solemn procession began to file through the house gate. "The corpse washers and mourners are here," he said. "Excuse me, Inspector, I have my sad duties."

He went away, carefully choosing the middle of the tiles that flagged the terrace. The Inspector shrugged and turned to Sergeant Abdullah, who stood at his elbow.

"You wish to interrogate the watchman, sir?" asked Abdullah.

He indicated Murad, who stood in the background at attention and holding a heavy brassbound staff at his side in the position of a grounded rifle. The man had a soldier's straight carriage. His hair and mustache were grizzled; he was quite old.

Chafik said, "Sometimes discreet inquiries are more fruitful than interrogation. I am told this man has changed his habits and become a frequenter of cafés. You will check this information."

"At once, sir."

When Abdullah left, Chafik completed his inspection of the house. He climbed high steps to the gallery surrounding the upper floor. Here had been the quarters of the harem women, but it was

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many years since bright eyes had peeped through the iron lattice-work of the windows.

One door was open. The Inspector glanced inside and nodded approval of the neatness. This must be Romani's room, he thought.

More steps led to the flat roof which had served as a promenade for the women in the cool of the day. At this hour it was exposed to the glare of the sun, and Chafik covered the nape of his neck before venturing out.

He was greeted by a scolding chorus from the gathering of birds and was puzzled by their behavior until he looked up and saw a hawk poised in the sky. The birds were swifts, a gregarious species that banded together against an enemy. They commonly nested in old buildings.

Chafik loitered to watch a pair perched on an air shaft. The cock picked up a wisp of straw and offered it to the hen, who chirped plaintively and ruffled her feathers. Such obvious dejection roused the Inspector's sympathy and he said, "The fledgling that fell, was it yours?" He heard himself and was embarrassed because it was an old habit, this talking to himself.

Briefly he looked at the air shaft which rose a few feet above the parapet of the roof. The small vent in the side faced upriver to catch the prevailing summer breeze. Possibly this was the shaft which fed the *surdab*. There were traces of a nest in the vent, and Chafik wondered who had destroyed it. The Hadji would not have sanctioned it, but a servant might have taken unauthorized action.

"Was it your nest?" Chafik asked the unhappy pair, who had made shrill complaint at his approach.

He was again embarrassed by the sound of his voice making foolish conversation with birds. Walking to the far side of the roof, which overlooked the river, he glanced over the parapet. The fisherman he had noticed earlier was still standing motionless in the shallows.

The Inspector watched idly and then called down, "What fortune?"

The man looked up. "Fortune will come if Allah wills," he answered.

"Do you expect fish to rise in this heat?"

"Who can be certain of the ways of fish and men?" the man said, shrugging. "But I know there is a fish. It jumped and roused me when I was sleeping after the noon prayer. A very big fish, it made a big splash. I will get half a dinar for it in the bazaar."

"You are patient. It is three hours since the noon prayer."

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The man said stubbornly, "He will rise when the sun goes down."

"May you be rewarded," said Chafik.

He went down the steps and passed the ground-floor room where the Hadji lay on the funeral bier, surrounded by chanting mourners. In the garden Chafik found Abdullah, who announced, "Sir, I have made the inquiries you requested. It is true about Murad."

"He frequents cafés?"

"Yes, sir. And I am informed he chooses places that have a Kurdish clientele. The Shafiites are a Kurdish—"

"Yes," said Chafik, twisting the signet ring on the little finger of his left hand. "I trust you made your inquiries discreetly?"

"I am your disciple, sir. I picked one of the lesser servants as a likely informant. When he talked, I arrested him on suspicion of theft so that no gossip of what I asked might reach Murad."

"You are as cautious as Mr. Romani. And now it would be tactful to remove ourselves from this house of mourning," the Inspector said. "My head whirls and I am going home to rest."

Entering his home on the Street of the Scatterer of Blessings, Inspector Chafik removed his jacket, loosened his tie, and announced to Leila, his wife, "I shall forgo food. Food causes a body to perspire. A perspiring body is as unpleasant as a dead one." He dropped into a chair under the ceiling fan.

There was an illusion of coolness; shutters had been closed at an early hour and the tiled floor was sprinkled with water to sweeten the air. The fan, rapidly drying Chafik's dank hair, chilled him, and he said irritably, "Wife, cover my head. You know I am susceptible to colds." He looked at the small boy who waited to greet him and added on a severe note, "A son should help his mother. Remove my shoes, Faisal."

The boy squatted on his heels. Then, looking up at the tired man in the chair, he asked, "Was it a very bloody murder? Was his throat cut?"

Chafik forgot the heat. He said, "Such words from such tender lips! But the error is mine; I forgot you had ears."

The ears of the eight-year-old boy who had been a waif in the bazaars of Baghdad, and adopted as the son of a childless marriage, were small and pointed, and he had enormous eyes. The father tweaked an ear and smiled, then looked at his wife who took Faisal away.

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She returned to cover her husband's head with a shawl and when he took her hand and held it to his cheek, she knew he was troubled. "Let me share the burden," she said softly.

"Did I speak? Voice a thought? It is such a disturbing habit, this talking to myself."

"You were silent, but a wife reads her man's thoughts," said the small dark woman.

Chafik sat up and lighted a cigarette. "Yes, I am troubled," he admitted, and told her of the death of Hadji Hussain.

Leila exclaimed, "Oh, the poor old man! He was so saintly, so beloved."

"His death is a reflection upon my department."

"So it was murder?"

"An accident," Chafik said shortly.

"Then, my man, there can be no blame!"

"Women and ostriches," said her husband, "both seek sand piles for their heads when faced by an unwelcome fact. The Hadji died surrounded by men. Therefore I am responsible, accident or not."

"But it was an accident," Leila insisted.

He said impatiently, "Yes, yes, an accident. It could not be otherwise since the house was so carefully guarded. I do not believe an enemy entered invisibly, struck him and vanished. But—" Chafik looked for an ashtray for his cigarette and Leila hurried to bring him one, "The watchman, Murad, changed his habits," he finished.

"That worries you?" She did not understand but let him talk to ease his mind.

"Everything would seem to indicate that Hadji Hussain's death was accidental. But the behavior of Murad is not clear. And then there is the dead bird. Did it fall inside or outside the *surdab?* And the open door. Did the Hadji open it? Before or after his fatal fall? I must satisfy myself on these points before I make my report," Chafik added as he settled back to rest.

Leila left him and presently he was lulled by the swish of the ceiling fan. He slept for perhaps half an hour, restlessly, muttering to himself. Then something disturbed him and he was abruptly wide awake.

A rhythmic tapping came from the hall adjoining the room, and a voice timed to it changed in a whisper, "Wunna two, abbookel my shoe, three, four, shutter door—"

Inspector Chafik rose and drew back the bead curtain from the doorway. His small son was bouncing a hard ball against the floor; the ball was attached to an elastic looped to Faisal's finger, which made it snap back into his hand.

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"Fwife six, piccup six—"

Chafik said, "Macbeth murdered sleep; you murder sleep and the English language. They do not teach you well at school. Say, 'Five, six, pick up sticks.' " The father instructed with the precision that characterized his second tongue. "Six is a numeral. Sticks are instruments of chastisement. I am tempted to use one on you."

He took the ball, looped the elastic over a finger, and idly bounced it. "When you can clearly say, 'One, two, buckle my shoe,' you may have this back," he told Faisal.

Chafik turned away so that he should not see the tears in the boy's eyes; the man who had brought punishment to so many found it hard to punish his own child.

"But, my father, already I speak English well," Faisal pleaded for approval. "Today I learned, 'Hookilt cockerobbin.' "

"You learned what?"

"Hookilt—"

Chafik put his hand to his ears. "The word is neither Arabic nor English. Surely you mean, 'Who killed—' and it goes on about a bird. A pity I cannot remember the rhyme exactly, to school you in it. I believe there is something about a sparrow."

The boy interrupted eagerly, "I sedder sparrow wit' my bowen narrow."

"Then," said Chafik, still trying to remember, "there was a fly. And Cock Robin's funeral was quite a social affair. All the birds of the air gathered—"

He stopped and looked blankly at his son and repeated, "All the birds gathered because one died. Yes, they do. Particularly gregarious birds such as swifts and sparrows." He opened his hands in a groping gesture and Faisal's ball fell and dangled unnoticed on its elastic. "I had assumed the hawk had alarmed them," Chafik went on. "A wrong assumption; they gathered to keen the end of the fledgling. And the dead bird in the Hadji's lap, when was it killed, how long before?"

Faisal was bewildered, angry and tearful. "A bird, father? Who has murdered a bird?"

"Who has murdered, and how?" Chafik repeated softly. Absently he began pulling the dangling ball by its elastic, then suddenly let it fall and once more pulled it up, watching with growing excitement.

He announced, "There was a fish. It jumped. And a fisherman, a fisherman with his net."

"A net, father?" Faisal repeated.

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"The threads weave a pattern. But who was Death? Who—"

Chafik ran from the house, hatless, into the sun of late afternoon. He was halfway up the road when the wail of his son's voice penetrated the fog of his thoughts.

"Father, my father, you have forgotten your shoes!"

The Inspector hired a boat at the top of his street and dropped downstream to the river house of Hadji Hussain. He urged the boatman to make speed; he was afraid the fisherman might have gone away.

But the man was still there and looked up reproachfully as the boat floated under the high wall. "You scare my fish," he grumbled.

Chafik said, "It has not risen? Then cast your net. Here is a dinar; let me see your skill. Cast where you saw the splash."

The fisherman whirled the circular net and released it. Opening in mid-air, skimming the water like a giant bat, it struck the spot where he had seen the splash five hours earlier. Weights carried it down and with a leap the man was on it, feeling with his toes for what he had caught.

"There is something, but not a fish," he said with disappointment.

He ducked under and gathered the net around his prize. Shaking out the sand and gravel, he untangled an object from the mesh and brought it to the boat.

"A stone wrapped in cloth," he said with disgust. "My fish!"

Chafik silence him and examined the catch. Double folds of cloth were fashioned into a small stout bag. Inside was a smooth rock or lump of metal; the weight was about three kilos, the Inspector judged. The neck of the bag was tied by strong twine which had been cut short and left a dangling end.

When Chafik looked up he had the face of a hanging judge and he said to the fisherman, "This day you have netted a man's head." Then he ordered his boat to the shore.

He was admitted to the Hadji's house by the watchman.

Chafik said, "Oh, man of the hills, why did you change your habits and go to cafés? To places frequented by Shafiites?"

Murad answered directly, "I have eaten my master's salt these many years. I went to look for his enemies among those who had threatened him. I would have killed them. Was that not proper?"

The Inspector looked at the man and saw tears in his eyes. He patted Murad's arm and said, "Forgive me, my mind follows tortuous paths. I did not perceive such a simple explanation. Go with God, faithful servant."

He ran up the steps to the roof. Swifts were darting to and fro

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in the golden light of early evening, but the disconsolate pair he had noticed on his previous visit were still perched on the *surdab* air shaft.

Chafik said, "Be comforted, you who witnessed this thing. Your evidence is now very clear."

He put the weighted bag by the shaft and went down to the gallery on the second floor. The mourners were still chanting below and there was an odor of incense.

The Inspector entered Romani's room and made a careful search of closets and drawers. His task was simplified by the lawyer's tidiness and he was soon finished. Empty-handed and troubled, Chafik announced in a flat voice, "Of course, one so cautious might have destroyed it."

He went out and tried several of the other rooms. Left of the steps leading to the roof he found another that was tenanted and when he saw the clothing scattered around, the cluttered drawers, he had censorious thoughts for youth. But he searched methodically and disregarded the impulse to tidy the shambles.

With long, sensitive fingers he probed the confusion in the drawers of the dressing table. Then, from the jumble of odds and ends, he took out a tangled ball of strong cord. He put it in his pocket and continued the search.

There were letters with Cairo postmarks. He skimmed through them unaware that the chanting below had stopped, that the ceremony of preparing the corpse of Hadji Hussain was over. He was still reading, oblivious to his surroundings, when instinct warned him and he looked up.

Sadir stood in the doorway, and behind him was the gaunt figure of Romani. Sadir said petulantly, "What are you doing in my room reading my letters?"

"You will explain, Inspector," interposed Romani sternly. "I strongly disapprove of this irregular action. As a lawyer—"

"The hyena," said Chafik, "normally follows in the wake of the lion. I have not yet made the kill."

"I shall complain—"

"Complainants, some of them, await on the roof. Let us join them." The Inspector made his little bow.

He escorted the two men from the room and up the steps. Sadir had a dazed look and he stumbled. Romani's thin body was stooped. No one spoke.

When they were on the roof, Chafik said, "The open door of the *surdab* led me astray, but now I know who opened it. The Hadji received a fatal blow, and when he was able, he stumbled to the

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door for help, but already it was too late, and he collapsed after he opened it."

"An accident," insisted Romani. "My uncle tripped and fell."

"It was murder."

"He was alone in the room."

"Yes," said Chafik. "He was alone, yet he was attacked. I will show you how it was done. But we lack a dead bird, a fledgling. There was one in a nest here." The Inspector pointed to the vent of the air shaft. "Your uncle did not permit nests to be destroyed, but it was necessary to remove this one to clear the shaft. The marks on the stone prove it was done recently. Even more conclusive is the agitation of the birds. Have you noticed how many swifts have gathered, a whole community rallying to a bereaved family?"

Romani said, "Come to the point. I know nothing about birds."

Chafik said, "Fortunately I have a son who remembered an English nursery rhyme. But to continue. The nest was destroyed, the neck of the fledgling was twisted, and as bait for the old man who loved birds it was dropped down the shaft."

He looked from one man to the other. The lawyer was tense, his forehead furrowed as though he concentrated on a difficult brief. Sadir's dazed eyes stared and he chewed his underlip.

"The Hadji was reading," continued Inspector Chafik. "He was disturbed by the fall of the bird and rose to succor it. He picked it up, wondered what had caused the fatality, and naturally looked up the air shaft. Then this happened."

Chafik produced the weighted bag found in the river and knotted to the neck the ball of twine from Sadir's drawer. He said conversationally, "This is how a man was killed," and dropped the weight down the shaft, retaining the end of the line in one hand.

Nothing in forty feet of smooth brickwork impeded the fall. When the bag struck the floor of the *surdab* the sound echoed back.

"Not a perfect test," Chafik apologized. "It was not so noisy when it struck the Hadji's head. The force of a three-kilo weight falling forty feet can be calculated. It was not necessary to practice marksmanship—the opening is small and the target was large. Even a glancing blow would have been fatal to a frail old man."

He stopped and for the first time looked directly at Sadir. The young man's mouth opened, but no sound came from it.

"And then," the Inspector said pitilessly, "you hauled up your weapon, cut the line short and threw the bag into the river. Did you fear the line would float? But how careless of you to leave it in your room! Otherwise you planned well, took nice advantage of foolish threats made against your victim by quite harmless

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people. You reasoned that with a police guard around the house the death of a man in a closed room would be considered an accident. And you would have been right if parent birds had not keened the cruel death of a fledgling, if my son had not played with a toy which I found very suggestive. And if there had not been a patient fisherman in the shallows."

Romani shook his head and said in his thin voice, "This case has a weakness. What was the motive for the alleged crime?"

"You yourself told us this wretched young decadent preferred Cairo to Baghdad. Also there are letters from a woman which suggest a powerful motive. Sadir was desperate to get back to her, but the Hadji had been appointed his guardian and controlled his money and his freedom. Young, spoiled, ruthless—I trust you are convinced, Mr. Romani?"

Lulled by the cadence of his own voice, the Inspector was unprepared when the lawyer turned with unexpected speed and caught Sadir by the throat. "You killed my uncle! You killed my uncle!" he screamed as he forced the young man to his knees.

Chafik broke the death grip. "Restrain yourself!" he said sharply, and then with a smile he added, "Such depth of emotion, Mr. Romani! How admirable—and how unexpected in one so cautious!"

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The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 140.

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The Story That Won

The January Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, FL. Honorable mentions go to Marcia Mascolini of Portage, MI; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, MI; Dennis Lewis of Owls Head, NY; Tom Polick of Chicago, IL; Ray Chabot of Waterdown, Ontario, Canada; Margo Fallis of Tucker, GA; Nancy Graben Williams of Cantonment, FL; James Hagerty of Melbourne, FL; and Robert Butler of Unity, Saskatchewan, Canada.



Career Change

BENJAMIN H. FOREMAN

"Why do you disgrace me so?" Igor shouted.

"But Papa," Molly protested, "we were only trying to get away."

"A public spectacle yet," Igor snorted.

"We did everything just the way you said," Ester butted in.

"What went wrong? Tell me that! I send you on simple job in out of the way hardware store, middle of day, only you two, and one clerk there. You get no money, nothing, and you leave store walking like crabs on beach."

"It wasn't our fault," Molly whined.

Igor's daughters stood before him, bent at the waist, heads glued together, faces turned sideways to look at him.

"I raise two girls, give fine American names, and this is way you repay me. Your first job is such failure, it will make it your last job."

"We didn't know the clerk was stirring a can of glue," Ester moaned.

"And he would throw it at us when I pointed a gun at him," Molly said.

"Then Molly dropped the gun, and we bumped heads when we both bent over to pick it up," Ester whimpered.

"So," Igor growled. "You make like circus clowns, heads stuck together, one walking, and the other on top, with feet sticking in air, and have picture taken to be splashed all over front page of newspaper."

"But Papa, we do have good news," Molly chortled.

"What good come from disaster?" Igor demanded.

"David Letterman's show called and wants us to appear on a segment called 'Stupid Human Tricks.' "

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Booked & Printed, continued from page 47

when brother Rob suspects something's wrong at his company, home of the wildly popular game "Lawyers from Hell." Indeed, almost everything is wrong at the manic company, which sports a buzzard named George; a dog, Spike, described as a "nine-pound, canine-shaped demon;" an assemblage of very creative and strange staff members; and six psychotherapists who happen to share, however uncomfortably, the same office space. When one of Mutant Wizard's programmers with a penchant for practical jokes pretends to be a murder victim, the joke turns sour quickly when he becomes a real corpse. Andrews has a knack for creating lovable loonies (animal and human) and the help Meg gets from her well-meaning dad and her hopelessly inept brother as she investigates various suspects within and without the company keeps the laughter and the mayhem roiling merrily along.

In neighboring West Virginia, Owen Allison, John Billheimer's hero who began his career as a transportation inspector and now is on his own as a failure analyst, continues to ply his unusual trade in unusual ways. In his fourth adventure in **Drybone Hollow** (St. Martin's, $22.95), Owen is hired by a former schoolmate to investigate the deadly (and messy) collapse of a containment dam that poured a river of coal slurry down Drybone Hollow, wiping out two trailers and four lives. The collapse also opened the way for a slew of scams ranging from the macabre to the ridiculous, while the perpetrators range from the vicious to the vacuous. Opportunistic fraud, bribery, kidnapping, murder, religious charlatans, scheming politicians, and extortion all play a part as Owen's initially simple investigation covers almost as much territory as the flood of slurry. Billheimer doesn't go for the belly laugh, but he spins a good yarn as Owen cleans up some of the messes while turning a blind eye to others. Billheimer has an obvious affection for the land and the idiom of these West Virginia folk and his humorous treatment never belittles either.

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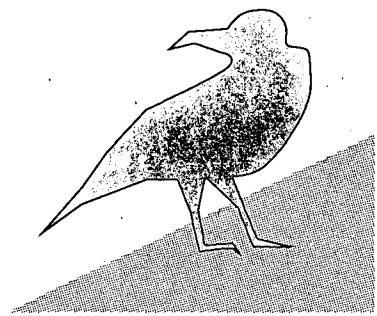
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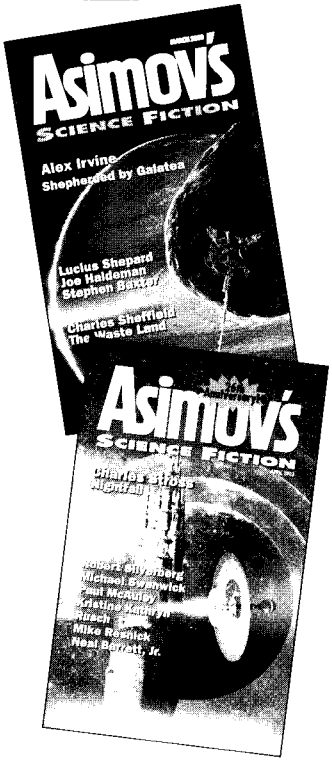
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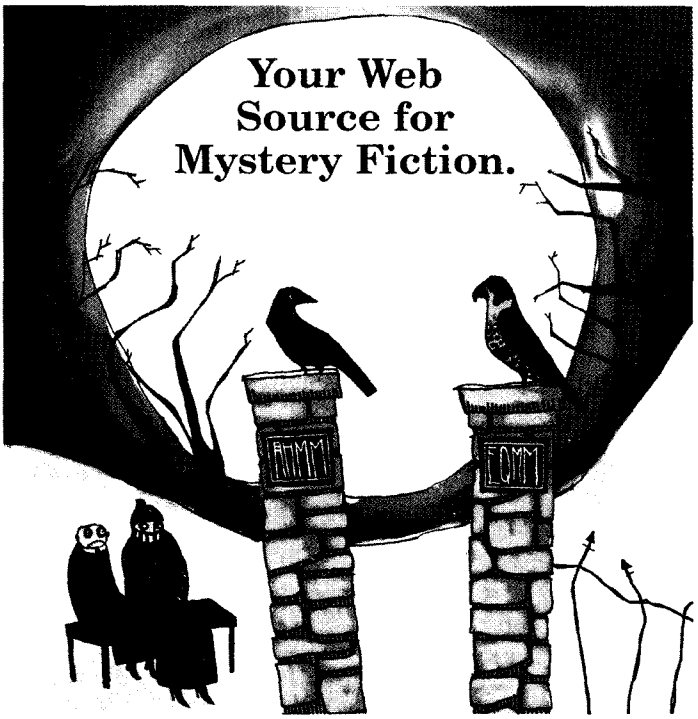
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